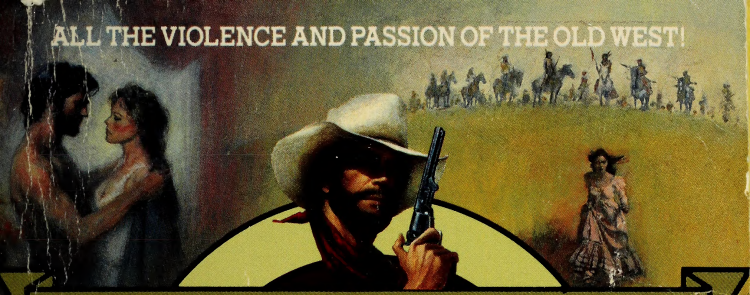
ALL THE VIOLENCE AND PASSION OF THE OLD WEST!

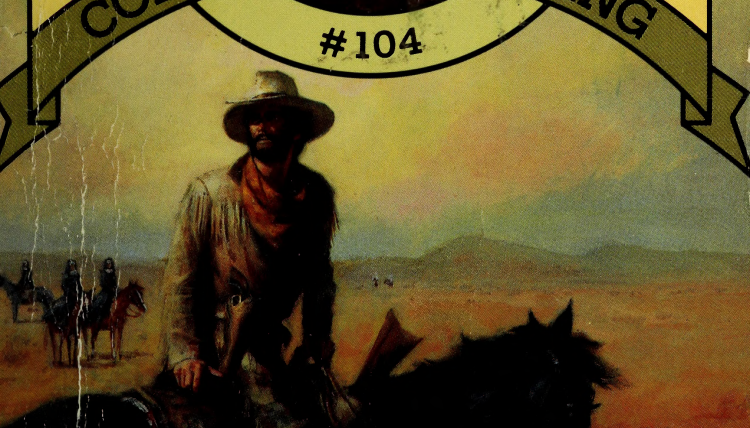


THE

TRAILSMAN

COMANCHE CROSSING

#104



SKYE FARGO STRIPS FOR ACTION WHEN A STRANGE MASQUERADE EXPLODES IN NAKED VIOLENCE

JON SHARPE

SIGNET · 451-AE6705 · (CANADA $3.95) · U.S. $3.50

50350
9 780451 167057

C.M. 1991

FAIR FIGHT FOR FARGO

A group of three men came toward the saloon. Their gun belts hung low, their gun hands touching the grips of their weapons.

As Fargo stared out the door he muttered to the women, "Get down behind the bar. It's showdown time."

A gunman stepped out from between two buildings near the saloon. Then his partner came around the far side of it. From the café across the street a third man appeared, with a Colt in his hand. And yet another came out from behind the general store.

Andrea gasped, "My God, Mr. Fargo, there's seven of them."

Fargo replied wryly, "Even odds, ma'am."

SIGNET (0451)

JON SHARPE'S WILD WEST

☐ **CANYON O'GRADY #1: DEAD MEN'S TRAILS by Jon Sharpe.** Meet Canyon O'Grady, a government special agent whose only badge, as he rides the roughest trails in the West, is the colt in his holster. O'Grady quickly learns that dead men tell no tales, and live killers show no mercy as he hunts down the slayer of the great American hero Merriwether Lewis. (160681—$2.95)

☐ **CANYON O'GRADY #2: SILVER SLAUGHTER by Jon Sharpe.** With a flashing grin and a blazing gun, Canyon O'Grady rides the trail of treachery, greed, and gore in search of nameless thieves who are stealing a vital stream of silver bullion from the U.S. government. (160703—$2.95)

☐ **CANYON O'GRADY #3: MACHINE GUN MADNESS by Jon Sharpe.** A gun was invented that spat out bullets faster than a man could blink and every malcontent in the Union wanted it. Canyon's job was to ride the most savage crossfire the West had ever seen to rescue the deadliest weapon the world had ever known. (161521—$2.95)

☐ **CANYON O'GRADY #4: SHADOW GUNS by Jon Sharpe.** With America split between North and South and Missouri being a border state both sides wanted, Canyon O'Grady finds himself in a crossfire of doublecross trying to keep a ruthless pro-slavery candidate from using bullets to win a vital election. (162765—$3.50)

☐ **CANYON O'GRADY #5: THE LINCOLN ASSIGNMENT by Jon Sharpe.** Bullets, not ballots, were Canyon O'Grady's business as top frontier troubleshooter for the U.S. Government. But now he was tangled up in election intrigue, as he tried to stop a plot aimed at keeping Abe Lincoln out of office by putting him in his grave. (163680—$3.50)

☐ **CANYON O'GRADY #6: COMSTOCK CRAZY by Jon Sharpe.** Canyon O'Grady hits a murder-mad town with blazing guns as he rides into Virginia City with an impossible clean-up job to do, an unspeakable slaying to avenge, and an unbeatable trigger finger itching for rapid-fire action. (164423—$3.50)

☐ **CANYON O'GRADY #7: THE KING OF COLORADO by Jon Sharpe.** A great new Western hero in a battle royal against a reign of terror, Canyon O'Grady is up against the maddest, most murderous threat ever to ravish the Wild West . . . (165470—$3.50)

Buy them at your local bookstore or use this convenient coupon for ordering.
NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY
P.O. Box 999, Bergenfield, New Jersey 07621

Please send me the books I have checked above. I am enclosing $_____ (please add $1.00 to this order to cover postage and handling). Send check or money order—no cash or C.O.D.'s. Prices and numbers are subject to change without notice.

Name_____

Address_____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.
This offer, prices and numbers are subject to change without notice.

THE

TRAILSMAN

104

COMANCHE CROSSING

by

Jon Sharpe

A SIGNET BOOK

SIGNET
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1B4
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published by Signet, an imprint of New American Library, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

First Printing, August, 1990
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Copyright © Jon Sharpe, 1990
All rights reserved

REGISTERED TRADEMARK—MARCA REGISTRADA

Printed in the United States of America

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE AT QUANTITY DISCOUNTS WHEN USED TO PROMOTE PRODUCTS OR SERVICES. FOR INFORMATION PLEASE WRITE TO PREMIUM MARKETING DIVISION, PENGUIN BOOKS USA INC., 375 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014.

The Trailsman

Beginnings . . . they bend the tree and they mark the man. Skye Fargo was born when he was eighteen. Terror was his midwife, vengeance his first cry. Killing spawned Skye Fargo, ruthless, cold-blooded murder. Out of the acrid smoke of gunpowder still hanging in the air, he rose, cried out a promise never forgotten.

The Trailsman, they began to call him, all across the West: searcher, scout, hunter, the man who could see where others only looked, his skills for hire but not his soul, the man who lived each day to the fullest, yet trailed each tomorrow. Skye Fargo, the Trailsman, the seeker who could take the wildness of a land and the wanting of a woman and make them his own.

Texas, 1860, on the lower Rio Grande,
where bad habits came from Mexico
and left a swath of death and destruction
north to Comanche country . . .

1

The big man astride the magnificent black-and-white pinto stallion rode easy in the saddle under a warm noonday sun. Not one cloud spoiled the soft-blue sky. The still air carried tolerable humidity. The deer path he followed wandered near the north bank of the lower Rio Grande. He could smell the lazy flowing river, although he couldn't see it. Between him and the river shone a blaze of light-green foliage in the sunlight—the springtime colors of mesquite, which grew abundantly here and over most of the state—a plague to ranchers. The low-growing trees prevented the growth of grass so vital for cattle. In the sparse open areas among the mesquite were patches of equally prolific prickly pear, hungry for all the sunlight they could get.

As far as he could see on his right, the flat terrain was a solid dark green with weeds knee-high or taller.

After delivering a prize bull to a south Texas rancher Skye Fargo had headed north. The two-hundred-dollar fee he had received put a small bulge in his left hip pocket. A dull ache in his shoulders was a sore remembrance of the cantankerous bull. The brute had torn down the fence on which Fargo and the rancher had sat to admire the huge animal. Fargo was sent sky-high and landed on his shoulders. But the bull problem was behind him now.

His thoughts centered on his immediate destination, Cougar Canyon, where he could enjoy an interlude on the long journey to the Wyoming Territory. He was due at Fort Laramie the first week of June. Gloria O'Malley,

the buxom madam of Rhapsody House in Cougar Canyon, had the absolute biggest copper bathtub west of the Mississippi. Hers was the only tub he'd found that could accommodate his full length.

Well, so could Gloria, but with much grunting and screaming. O'Malley was quick to favor him with her bourbon, her copper tub, and her fleshy body. The mere thought of the curly-haired redhead brought a grin to Fargo's chiseled-face, put a twinkle in his lake-blue eyes.

A buzzing hum broke his reverie. The trail meandered through an acre or more of Indian blankets. Legions of bees worked busily among the colorful red-yellow-brown petals of the pretty wildflowers that resembled blankets made by Indians. The monotonous hum was blissful, almost hypnotic. The Trailsman couldn't have been more comfortable and at ease if he had ordered it so.

Suddenly, the Ovaro raised his head, perked his ears. Fargo looked up. About a mile away several hillocks interrupted the otherwise level landscape. He reined in to silence the soft sounds of the saddle so his wild-creature hearing could listen through the hum while he studied the hills.

He saw nothing to alert the stallion. Muffled though they were, the dull cracks he heard came from muskets firing up ahead, on the Mexican side of the great river. He spurred the Ovaro to a gallop and headed for the nearest hill to see what was happening.

Atop the steep rise, he reined to a halt among mesquites. Pulling a limb back to get an unobstructed view, he looked across the river below. Several adobe hovels dotted the barren landscape between the river and the small border town, which he recognized as San Miguel, a haven for smugglers and outlaws fleeing Anglo lawmen. The few peons out in the open scampered home. The single dirt street of San Miguel was deserted, standing wide open for easy passage by the four horsemen thundering in from the west.

They rode in a tight diamond formation, pounding hard and fast, heading straight for the river. Less than a hundred yards behind, and closing fast, rode a great

force of uniformed *federales* led by an officer on a white horse. The long saber the man brandished gleamed in the sunlight, and the soldiers riding in the fore took potshots at the foursome. Fargo presumed they were *bandidos* making for safety in Texas.

As they rode closer, furrows appeared on Fargo's brow and he raised an eyebrow, for he saw the three in front rode sidesaddle. Squinting to bring them into sharper focus, he saw they wore the garb of nuns. A man wearing a brown robe brought up the rear.

Outlaws, smugglers, or no, Fargo didn't cotton to killing women, especially when they were unarmed. He released the branch and withdrew his Sharps from its saddle case. He waited for the soldiers to come within range, then shot the lead musketeer out of the saddle. The fellow fell backward and toppled over the rump of his horse. The pack parted to avoid trampling their comrade, who was tumbling in the swirl of red dust.

As the lead nun's mount plunged into the water at a dead run, Fargo returned the Sharps to its case and started down the mesquite-infested slope. He watched her abandon the saddle most skillfully, but she hung on to the saddle horn so the horse could take her across. By the time he reached the base of the hill, dismounted, and got into position to fire from shielding mesquite trees, the other two nuns and the priest were in the river, hanging on to their saddles.

Fargo drew his Colt as the *federales* arrived on the far bank. Now that the clergy had made it into the river—a no-man's-land—and as such, ostensibly a safe sanctuary—he wouldn't shoot unless the soldiers fired.

He watched the lanky officer to read the man's intentions. The man seemed confused as he pranced his horse back and forth along the bank. It was as though he felt unsure what to do next: go after them, let them go free, or have his men shoot them in the water.

Four horsemen, all dressed in white and wearing white headdresses the likes of which Fargo had never seen—the head coverings flowed much like bandages unraveling—emerged from behind the troops and rode to the officer.

After considerable arm waving, one shouted in bad Spanish to the officer, who nodded.

A decision had been made. On the officer's command, his troops dismounted and formed in two ranks at the river's edge. The front rank knelt and aimed their long-barreled muskets at the foursome in the water. Intentionally bypassing the saber-wielding officer for a more threatening target, Fargo raised the Colt and took aim on a front-line soldier's chest.

The officer shouted, "Fire!"

Ten flintlock hammers fell, igniting powder. Wisps of smoke puffed from the powder holes. A half-blink later the muskets roared, belched gunsmoke several feet, and the water around the nuns fairly churned with tiny geysers. Fargo left two of the musketeers sprawled half off the bank. As the second rank stepped forward, the front rank stood back to reload. Fargo emptied the cylinder at the replacements, then started reloading.

Infuriated by his men's poor marksmanship and clearly baffled that unarmed swimmers could shoot back, the officer commanded the front rank of soldiers to take good aim and make the river run red with blood. "Fire," he bellowed.

Again ten muskets belched and missed. Fargo moved his sights from left to right. A bandoleered chest appeared in his sights. He squeezed the trigger and thumbed back the hammer as he crossed to the next target. More bodies littered the bank before the nervous officer spotted Fargo partly hidden by the mesquite.

The swimmers had passed midstream when the officer pointed his saber at the mesquites and ordered his remaining men to shoot into them. Fargo was finishing reloading as the fusillade of musket balls stripped leaves from branches near him and tore into the hillside. He fired and dropped two musketeers as the lead nun's horse dragged her onto the bank. He shouted to her, "Run to your left! Go behind the hill!"

Ice-blue eyes glanced at him, and she nodded.

He stepped from the veiling mesquite and yelled to the other three, "Hurry! Follow her. Ándale!"

Fargo shot again as the other two women clambered

ashore. They looked at him as they ran alongside their mounts, which he recognized as being Arabians. The priest, who looked as though he might be thirty-years-old, paused to smile at Fargo and say, "Thank you, *monsieur.*" His voice carried a heavy French accent.

In that instant Fargo heard a ball thud into the man's back and saw him flinch. The Trailsman dashed to catch him so he wouldn't fall back into the water. Before he got to him two more balls slammed into the priest's back and knocked him into Fargo's arms. Fargo holstered his Colt, picked up the bleeding man, and ran for safety.

The females were mounted, ready to ride, but dismounted quickly when Fargo rushed up and laid the priest facedown on the ground. To Fargo's surprise the fellow was conscious and alert. The nun with ice-blue eyes pulled the priest's collar open and drew his robe down to expose the wounds. At first sight of the ugly holes, Fargo knew the man had little time left.

In a clear, strong voice, the priest said, "*Monsieur*, put me on my horse. We must get away from them." Then he spoke in French to the nun, who Fargo saw was three, maybe four months pregnant.

She snapped her fingers once. One of the women instantly took off running back toward the river. Seconds later she returned with the priest's horse. With the bossy nun's help, Fargo got the priest in his saddle. The man leaned forward, winked at Fargo, then spurred the Arabian to a gallop. The nuns mounted up quickly and followed him out of the hills.

Their fast departure left Fargo blinking. Scratching his head, he whistled for the Ovaro. Ears at attention, the powerful black-and-white trotted around the hillock to him.

Mounting, he listened to the Mexican officer scream orders one after another, berating his musketeers for letting the four escape. Fargo rode just far enough around the hill to see what the *federales* were up to. As he watched, the officer led his men down into the river. Fargo wheeled the stallion, hurried to catch up with the foursome.

They were threading their way through the mesquite,

the Arabians' long tails raised high and whipping. The nuns were damn good riders, maintaining perfect balance in the sidesaddles. The priest was ahead of them by two lengths.

After breaking out of the trees Fargo caught up with them. Riding alongside the nuns, he shouted, "Faster, ladies! The *federales* are coming."

Nobody so much as glanced his way, but they had heard his warning. As a unit, the Arabains shot forward. He knew the Ovaro could outrun them on the short haul, but couldn't stay with them over a long distance. Arabians were structured for endurance; they could do it all. After running hard for about a half-mile, the Arabians pulled away from the tiring pinto. Fargo watched their rumps outdistance him rapidly. He eased back on the pinto's pace and watched the four continue on effortlessly. In less than five minutes they were mere specks, disappearing fast.

Fargo looked behind him to check on the *federales*. They were still picking their way through the thickly growing mesquites, but coming his way. He put the stallion into a canter to cool it down.

An hour passed before Fargo caught sight of the Arabians. They were grazing near a large oak tree. The nuns knelt in the tree's shade. He trotted the Ovaro the rest of the way and reined to a halt near the women. The priest lay facedown on a patch of grass. Fargo eased from the saddle and went to the wounded man.

"*Padre*, I don't know what's keeping you alive," he said. "I will say one thing for you, though: you're a damn tough man."

Fargo looked at the nuns. Were it not for their faces framed by their white wimples, he doubted if he could tell them apart. He decided none of them could be over twenty-five years old. Not a wrinkle showed on any of them, not even a hint of crow's-feet. Although they were on their knees, all appeared they would be about the same height—five feet, eight inches—and carried identical weight, no more than a hundred and twenty-five pounds. If the smooth condition of their faces and hands were any indication, the parts he couldn't see under their

long habits would prove equally as gorgeous. One had a tiny black mole a half-inch from the right corner of her full lips. The nun next to her had dark-brown eyes, and bossy, the ice-blue.

Fargo singled out Ice-blue and said, "There's a canteen hanging on my saddle horn. Would you bring it to me?"

Her fingers snapped twice. Brown-eyes went and fetched the canteen. He remembered the earlier snap had triggered Tiny Mole to fetch the priest's horse. Ice-blue had them trained to move on finger snaps; one and two obviously meant "Fetch." He wondered what three snaps meant.

Fargo turned the priest's head to one side and put the rim of the canteen to his mouth, but the priest refused to drink. He looked at Fargo with both urgency and pleading. The man was dying and trying to tell him something with his eyes before death came.

Fargo realized he wanted to speak but didn't have the strength left to get the words out. He removed his hat and bent his left ear close to the priest's mouth. The words came haltingly, barely discernible in the man's waning breaths. "*Monsieur* . . . I beg you . . . take them . . . a place . . ." The priest gasped as his eyes closed.

Fargo reckoned the man had taken his final breath, but the priest wasn't dead yet, only catching his wind. His eyes fluttered open, and this time Fargo strained to hear the words carried in the soft breathing. "Promise me . . . you will protect them . . . take them . . . Cowtown."

"I know the place. I promise I will," Fargo whispered.

The dying man half-smiled, then continued. "They hold . . . a secret, *monsieur* . . . must protect. Beware . . . Achmid, *monsieur* . . . al . . . cazara . . ."

"Al what?" Fargo whispered.

But the priest's ears could no longer hear. Neither did his dark eyes have vision. Fargo dragged two fingers down over the eyelids to close them, then rocked back on his haunches and looked south. The *federales* were a mile or more away, riding as doggedly as before. He shifted his gaze to the three immobile faces. "We must

leave," he began. "There isn't enough time to bury him here. Do we take the body and have it slow us down, or do we leave him here in the shade for the *federales* to find?"

There was no consultation among the nuns, not even an exchange of glances. Neither did any of them so much as look at the dead priest.

Ice-blue replied in a husky, authoritative voice, "We leave Father Jeansonne."

Without any snapping of her fingers the trio rose, went to their horses, and mounted up.

Fargo silently agreed with her wisdom. At the same time he felt a mild shudder ripple through his body, for his sixth sense warned him these women were cold-blooded, especially Ice-blue, in whose veins ice water surely flowed.

Without looking back at the priest, Fargo got in his saddle and headed the Ovaro northeast at a gallop. The nuns rode in a line abreast of him.

Shortly before sundown, they left the flatness of the lower Rio Grande Valley and entered rolling-hill country. Within half an hour, Fargo found a spring-fed pond among large rocks. He reined to a halt beside a large boulder and told them, "We camp here for the night. No fire, though. Find a place to spread your bedrolls. I'll stand guard till midnight, then one of you can spell me. Who do I awaken?"

In an accent that matched the dead French priest's, Ice-blue answered immediately, "Awaken me, *monsieur*."

"Er, uh, how will I know which is you?" he stammered.

She looked at a tight space between two rocks. "There. I sleep light. I will hear you coming."

He nodded and said, "My name's Skye Fargo. What do I call each of you?"

Ice-blue glanced at Tiny Mole. "Sistaire Monique." Looking at Brown-eyes, she said, "Sistaire Camille. I am Sistaire Andrée. *Monsieur*, is it safe for us to bathe?"

He looked at her and checked a frown trying to form. They were cold-blooded all right, he thought. Their priest lies dead under the oak, *federales* bent on murdering them are breathing down their necks, and they want to

take a bath. "Of course you're safe," he answered dryly. He wondered if he were safe. Sisters Camille and Monique were eyeing him like a fox eyes hens trapped in a henhouse. Nuns weren't supposed to do that. He got his Sharps and scaled the tallest boulder to sit and keep guard.

Fargo watched the trio spread their bedrolls, then inspect their horses' hooves. He thought Sister Monique had the best-looking Arabian. The gelding, a bay, had a black mane and tail, and a beautifully arched long, fine neck. Sister Camille's mount, also a gelding, was jet-black. Sister Andrée rode a chestnut mare. All appeared to stand about fourteen and a tad hands tall. Satisfied with the condition of the hooves, they walked to the pond.

While they were in dark shadows, he could still see them although vaguely, not clearly enough to discern Sister Andrée's belly. They didn't seem concerned that he sat in clear sight of them. Their uncaring made him feel a mite uncomfortable. Fargo wondered what all went on inside those back rooms of missions late at night. He turned so he wasn't facing them directly. Nonetheless, he caught himself watching them out of the corners of his eyes several times while they undressed and entered the water. He knew the spring-fed pond was ice-cold, but not one of them so much as uttered a low whimper, or gasped, or gave any indication she felt it.

"I was right," he muttered to himself, "all three are cold-blooded."

Fargo shifted his gaze to the majestic, huge red disk of the setting sun, and frowned. Framed by the fiery curvature was the silhouette of a hill. On top of the hill stood six mounted riders, none of whom wore the tall, easy-to-recognize hats he'd seen on the *federales*.

Beyond and left of the hill licked the first flames of a camp fire. He watched it for a moment and mused aloud, "The *federales* are cooking supper."

As the red rim vanished, the Trailsman looked toward the hilltop again. The horsemen had also disappeared. He wondered if they had spotted him.

Fargo looked down on the pond, now obscured by

darkness, thankful for the nuns' discipline at maintaining silence.

A coyote howled.

Through the mournful cry he heard a hammer fall behind him.

2

Fargo's strong urge to live triggered an instantaneous reflex. In one swift move he fell to his left, plastered his back to the smooth top of the boulder, and swung the Sharps around in a half-circle. The barrel collided with something less than solid.

A flintlock pistol fired. The ball whooshed over his head and into the ink-black night. Fargo squirmed away from the edge of the boulder. He heard the would-be assassin clawing frantically on the side of the tall stone. The man lost his grip, fell, and hit hard on the ground. Fargo rolled off the boulder to take on his assailant.

During the brief drop, he heard more than one pair of feet scuffling around where the nuns' bedrolls lay. He landed on his nocturnal adversary's thighs and stumbled awkwardly for a few yards before regaining his balance. A male voice groaned.

Fargo dived toward the sound. His right hand grabbed material. The man jerked away and left him holding fabric. He flung the cloth aside and lunged at the man, who was scuttling backward, away from him.

A fist struck Fargo hard in the mouth, bringing tears to his eyes. He lunged again, but the agile man leapt clear. Again the fist hit him, this time a glancing blow on his left shoulder.

Fargo rolled to his left and drew his Arkansas toothpick. The bastard would feel cold steel, he told himself. He came to his feet, dragged the back of his free hand across his mouth, and groped blindly in the darkness to find his quarry. The man had moved away, broken off

his attack. Soft though they were, he heard the sounds of several pair of feet hurrying through the rocks, heading toward the pond.

Fargo shouted, "Into the water, Sisters! The *federales* are coming!" He hurried after the fast-moving feet. He wanted the dry-gulcher very badly.

As he came around a large rock, hands grabbed his ankles and tripped him. Fargo fell face-first onto one of the rocks surrounding the pond, and lost his grip on the stiletto. He heard it splash into the water. Fists pummeled him, too many and too fast for one man.

He pushed away from the rock, spun, and swung blindly. His big right fist caught one of them in the gut. He hoped the gush of wind came from his first attacker. He swung again. His fist slammed into a shoulder.

Arms grabbed him from behind and pinned his. Fargo twisted violently and wrenched free. Before he could backhand the man, another pair of hands grabbed him by the throat from behind and choked tightly. The Trailsman raised his right arm and spun, brought the arm down, and seized his choker's viselike hold. For a split second their faces were close enough for him to discern the unraveled bandages covering most of the man's head. The man spit in his eyes. Recoiling, Fargo drove a fist into the man's stomach. The man grunted painfully and staggered back, doubled over.

Three of the men leapt on him, took him to the hard ground, and started beating him. He swung viciously, each fist finding flesh. Still they came at him, deathly silent as before. Eight fists flew and found targets. He grappled with them on the ground and against the rocks. These are the toughest Mexicans I've ever tackled, he thought, and punched a jaw.

The man he'd gut-punched emitted a shrill whistle from where he hovered nearby in the dark. As though the whistle were an order, the four took off running. They went west, through the rocks, away from the pond.

Fargo sighed and rubbed his face and head, finding scrapes, gashes, and knots. His left eye felt puffy and his lower lip was split. The three lumps he found on his

noggin meant nothing. They'd be gone before the sun came up.

Pleased that the nuns had stayed in the safety of the water, he called to them, "All right, Sisters, the show's over. Now that they know where to find us, they'll probably be back with the whole Mexican army. I'll go away so you can come out and dress. See you at the horses. We have to leave this place."

Nobody answered. Fargo shrugged and went to saddle the Ovaro.

When he returned to the campsite, he heard movement at the sisters' bedrolls. Fargo drew his Colt and cocked it, squinting toward the soft sounds in the darkness. Sister Andrée's husky voice said, "It is us, *monsieur*."

He uncocked the Colt and holstered it, sounding a warning, "Sisters, being quiet is a virtue, I know, and while I appreciate it, there are times when silence can get you killed. Like now. I didn't know you were here. Are you dressed? Did you hear me say we had to leave this place?"

Sister Andrée came close enough for him to make out that she was indeed fully dressed. She held out her bedroll and said, "They stabbed it many times, *monsieur*." In a wry tone she added, "They thought I was inside, *oui*?"

"The others?"

She turned and asked in French. After they replied, she told him, "The same. We go now, *oui*?"

"*Oui*," he answered. Shaking his head, he walked to his horse. He was beginning to wish he hadn't made that promise to the priest. Gorgeous and quiet though they are, he mused, these nuns carry a curse of some sort.

His toe caught the material he'd ripped off his assailant. He picked it up and found the cloth was square and had what felt like four knots tied in it. He felt over it but found no blood or crust of any kind. Odd, he thought, and stuck it inside his shirt to save for a curious look in the daylight.

After making the Ovaro ready to ride, he climbed the boulder and got his Sharps, then went to the pond to retrieve his stiletto. He stuck an arm down in the frigid

water where he heard the splash, and discovered it was too deep to feel the bottom. He shook his head and started undressing.

The women walked up and leaned on the rock next to him. Sister Andrée asked in a miffed tone, "You bathe?"

"No, Sister," he answered equally as indignantly. "I dive for my Arkansas toothpick. Better move away. My underdrawers come off next." He paused to give them time. When they didn't, he slipped the underwear down and off.

He stood on the bank to muster up the courage required to enter the icy water, decided it was futile to think he could, and stepped off to get it done and over in a hurry. He groped around on the sandy bottom until he found the stiletto. Breaking the surface, he gasped loudly and got out fast.

The nuns approached even closer, completely oblivious, so it seemed to his nakedness. Daring females, he thought. While pulling on his clothes he commented, "Those *federales* want you ladies dead before the sun comes up. Why? I think it's time you tell me what in the hell's going on."

Sister Andrée answered, "We don't know, *monsieur*."

"That's no answer," he snapped. "*Federales* don't hunt down people for no reason, especially people of the cloth, especially when they're this far north of the border. So, what is it?" His tone of voice left no doubt he was running out of patience with them.

"I don't know," she insisted.

Exasperated, he went about it another way. "Why did the priest want me to take you to Cowtown?"

"We must be there by the first of May. *Monsieur*, you promised."

I'm getting nowhere, he thought. He pulled on his boots and started walking. "Come on, ladies. Let's see if we can elude them. They know you weren't inside your bedrolls."

Fargo led them north at a gallop. Within the hour a full moon rose in the starlit sky. Thirty minutes later the landscape took on a diffused gray-white coloration. Visi-

bility was good. He halted in open country to dismount and rest the horses.

Sister Andrée asked, "*Monsieur*, why are we stopping?"

"Because I'm tired." He started walking.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"To relieve myself." He stopped at a bed of prickly pear and undid his fly. While wetting the growth he listened to the women talk in low tones.

After a few seconds Sister Andrée spoke loud enough for him to hear. "*Monsieur*, we must hurry. We will ride ahead."

"Wouldn't do that if I were you, ma'am." He anticipated her next question. "What's to say the *federales* aren't out there waiting for us?"

He heard the Arabians head north at a gallop. Walking back to his horse, he watched them blend into the terrain and disappear. He nudged the Ovaro into a walk and for the next hour rode easy in the saddle and stargazed while following the tracks left by the desert horses.

At midnight, he caught up with the women. They had entered a large wooded area dominated by post oak. After going about a half-mile into the woods they had dismounted. They were asleep in their bedrolls spread under the thin canopy of the oak trees—easy prey for beast or lustful man. He shook his head. One moment they had to keep moving at all costs, the next it was bedtime. Fargo spread his bedding well out of sight of the women, undressed, crawled inside, and went to sleep.

A high-pitched scream snapped his eyes open. Another, from the mouth of one of the other females, brought him out of the bedroll, Colt in hand.

The moon had gone down, replaced by dawn's first grays. Sister Andrée's husky shriek made him abandon the Levi's in which he had one foot. He ran toward the sounds and halted behind a group of closely grown oak. Peering between two of the trunks, he watched the dark form of one of the women run a zigzag route while glancing over her shoulder, apparently to check on her attacker.

The other two had shinnied partway up the trunks of

post oaks no bigger around than his upper arm. They were hanging on for dear life.

All three were stark-naked. As he watched amusedly —he now knew they weren't under attack by the *federales*—the runner leapt, grabbed a limb, and pulled herself up onto it.

A grunting javelina boar hog charged through dense ground cover and started rooting with its vicious curved tusks in the soil under the limb holding the nun. After much snorting and grunting, the boar left. But the women stayed where they were.

Fargo listened to them chat back and forth in French for a few seconds, then stepped around the cluster of oaks and moved toward the treed women.

Coming closer, he saw the runner sat astride the limb, with her long slender legs hanging down and locked at the ankles. The other two had their arms and legs wrapped around the tree trunks.

Sister Andrée spoke from her perch on the limb. "Wait, *monsieur*! We are not—"

"Excuse me, ladies," he apologized quickly to interrupt her. "Sounded to me like the *federales* had jumped you. Now I see you're doing your morning exercises." He turned and went back to his bedroll.

Pulling on his clothes, Fargo paused and stared toward the women. He could hear them but couldn't see them. At this distance they were still veiled by the trees and the morning shadows. He wondered what had caused him to stop and look. Squinting his eyes, he focused on an oak nearby and tried to recall what he saw from the oak cluster. There was something about the static scene he was seeing in his mind that was wrong, or out of place. He wasn't sure. But something didn't fit right.

He closed his eyes and had his mind's eye focus on the vague, shadowy image. Sister Andrée sat on the limb. She was more or less facing him. He could see her, yes, but not her features. He tried to see the condition of her belly. Is that what's bothering me? he thought. The shape of her stomach wasn't defined enough for him to determine its size.

His mind's eye considered the other two women. Their

dark forms—practically hard silhouettes—resembled abnormal growths, bulges on the tree trunks; trees and women were one and the same.

He shook his head to clear away the annoying image, opened his eyes, and continued dressing. "It will come to me sooner or later," he muttered.

Sister Andrée walked up while he was securing his bedroll to the stallion. He noticed she was fully dressed and expressionless as ever. " 'Morning, Sister," he said. "With the exception of the sudden appearance of the hog, I trust you ladies slept well?"

"*Oui*, thank you. Our mounts are ready. We must hurry. I came to see if you are ready to continue."

He finished tying on the bedding while he watched her staring impatiently at him from the other side of the pinto. "About," he offered. He removed the square piece of knotted white cloth from his shirt and held it for her to see. "You know what this is?" he asked.

"*Bien sûr,*" she answered without hesitation. "It is a burnoose. Arabs wear them to protect their heads and necks from the blistering hot desert sun."

He grunted, "Arabs, huh?" and dropped it to the ground. "Be with you in a minute or so."

She nodded and turned to leave, but halted when he said, "Sister, I'm curious to know something. Fact is, I'm curious about several things."

Keeping her back to him, she answered, "Yes?"

"Why is it the three of you didn't seem concerned I would see you undress at the pond, then didn't want me to see your nakedness a few moments ago? Also, it didn't bother any of you for me to strip within an arm's reach of you before I went into the water to get my stiletto. On the one hand, nudity, yours or mine, doesn't seem to bother any of you. On the other hand, it does. Enlighten me, Sister, so I'll know what to do in the future. We still have a long journey in front of us."

After a long pause she answered, "It won't happen again, *monsieur*."

He watched her walk away. "That's no answer," he said loud enough for her to hear. She kept walking. He asked the Ovaro, "What won't happen again? Is she

saying they won't get naked in view of me, or won't run me off when they're in the raw?"

Ten minutes later they were winding their way through the woods. As they broke out onto open land, he broached a new subject, one that baffled him. "Aren't you ladies getting a tad hungry? We're coming up on being together for twenty-four hours, and so far I haven't seen any of you take one bite of food, or even mention eating. How do you do it?"

"We eat," Sister Andrée replied, and said no more.

Strange females, Fargo thought.

Shortly before noon they were on rolling landscape dotted with mesquite, scrub oak, and elm. In the distance far ahead a snaggled-tooth line of green low on the horizon indicated the presence of a stream. They watched the line grow larger and take on definition. From the corners of his eyes, Fargo saw each of the women lick her lips. They were also a mite restless in the saddle, shifting about more than usual. But if any had a parched throat or was about to burst for want of an outhouse, she never complained.

They found the trees, weeping willows mostly, growing on both banks of a narrow, shallow creek that snaked through the troughs of undulating ground. The creek was so paltry that the tree's branches formed a tunnel. While the nuns halted on the near bank and dismounted, Fargo crossed the creek and scanned the terrain on the far side.

He didn't necessarily like the lay of the land. The slope before him began gradually enough, but curved up abruptly behind a rock formation less than a hundred yards from the creek. Anybody in a hurry, he decided, would have a hell of a time with those rocks and the sharp rise.

It was worse on his left and right. There, the grassy slope joined brush-covered sides of rises crowned with several layers of flat rocks. Passage through the thick brush would be slow, negotiating the rocky top surfaces dangerous.

As he studied the rocky crest on his left, a covey of quail on the far side burst into view and scattered to the four winds. He watched the quail seek new ground cover, then he slowly reined the Ovaro around to go back to the

women. During the turn a second covey blasted over the summit closer to the creek.

That was one covey too many, too fast, to Fargo's way of thinking. He dug his heels into the pinto's flanks. The stallion charged into the creekbed. The Arabians were drinking, but their riders were nowhere in sight. Drawing his Colt, Fargo stared down through the shadowy tunnel that led to the rise where the quail had been flushed. His eyes searched both banks for the nuns as he eased the pinto along under the green coil and headed downstream.

A musket roared.

The ball passed close enough to Fargo's head to disturb his hair.

He spurred the Ovaro and charged forward, yelling, "Mount up, ladies!"

A federal officer's voice screamed, "You fool, I gave the order to take aim. Aim, not fire!"

A fusillade of musket balls ripped through the willows.

Fargo still had not spotted the *federales*, but he did glimpse the nuns on his left. They were rising quickly from squatting positions.

Blasting out of the canopy he came face-to-face with the officer astride his white steed. His six musketeers were on foot and in the act of reloading. Like the quail they had kicked up while getting into position, the soldiers scattered in all directions.

Fargo shot at them as he raced the pinto through the area. He dropped two running to their horses, a third diving for safety behind a large rock. As he wheeled the Ovaro to engage them again, the officer bellowed for his men to come back. Fargo holstered the empty Colt and drew his Arkansas toothpick.

The officer's horse reared, came down pawing, and shot forward. The officer had his long saber extended, its tip pointing at Fargo's chest, seconds away from impaling him.

The compactness of the creekbed was such that it prevented either man from escaping the other; a collision was imminent.

At the last split second, Fargo threw the stiletto. It

saying they won't get naked in view of me, or won't run me off when they're in the raw?"

Ten minutes later they were winding their way through the woods. As they broke out onto open land, he broached a new subject, one that baffled him. "Aren't you ladies getting a tad hungry? We're coming up on being together for twenty-four hours, and so far I haven't seen any of you take one bite of food, or even mention eating. How do you do it?"

"We eat," Sister Andrée replied, and said no more.

Strange females, Fargo thought.

Shortly before noon they were on rolling landscape dotted with mesquite, scrub oak, and elm. In the distance far ahead a snaggled-tooth line of green low on the horizon indicated the presence of a stream. They watched the line grow larger and take on definition. From the corners of his eyes, Fargo saw each of the women lick her lips. They were also a mite restless in the saddle, shifting about more than usual. But if any had a parched throat or was about to burst for want of an outhouse, she never complained.

They found the trees, weeping willows mostly, growing on both banks of a narrow, shallow creek that snaked through the troughs of undulating ground. The creek was so paltry that the tree's branches formed a tunnel. While the nuns halted on the near bank and dismounted, Fargo crossed the creek and scanned the terrain on the far side.

He didn't necessarily like the lay of the land. The slope before him began gradually enough, but curved up abruptly behind a rock formation less than a hundred yards from the creek. Anybody in a hurry, he decided, would have a hell of a time with those rocks and the sharp rise.

It was worse on his left and right. There, the grassy slope joined brush-covered sides of rises crowned with several layers of flat rocks. Passage through the thick brush would be slow, negotiating the rocky top surfaces dangerous.

As he studied the rocky crest on his left, a covey of quail on the far side burst into view and scattered to the four winds. He watched the quail seek new ground cover, then he slowly reined the Ovaro around to go back to the

women. During the turn a second covey blasted over the summit closer to the creek.

That was one covey too many, too fast, to Fargo's way of thinking. He dug his heels into the pinto's flanks. The stallion charged into the creekbed. The Arabians were drinking, but their riders were nowhere in sight. Drawing his Colt, Fargo stared down through the shadowy tunnel that led to the rise where the quail had been flushed. His eyes searched both banks for the nuns as he eased the pinto along under the green coil and headed downstream.

A musket roared.

The ball passed close enough to Fargo's head to disturb his hair.

He spurred the Ovaro and charged forward, yelling, "Mount up, ladies!"

A federal officer's voice screamed, "You fool, I gave the order to take aim. Aim, not fire!"

A fusillade of musket balls ripped through the willows.

Fargo still had not spotted the *federales*, but he did glimpse the nuns on his left. They were rising quickly from squatting positions.

Blasting out of the canopy he came face-to-face with the officer astride his white steed. His six musketeers were on foot and in the act of reloading. Like the quail they had kicked up while getting into position, the soldiers scattered in all directions.

Fargo shot at them as he raced the pinto through the area. He dropped two running to their horses, a third diving for safety behind a large rock. As he wheeled the Ovaro to engage them again, the officer bellowed for his men to come back. Fargo holstered the empty Colt and drew his Arkansas toothpick.

The officer's horse reared, came down pawing, and shot forward. The officer had his long saber extended, its tip pointing at Fargo's chest, seconds away from impaling him.

The compactness of the creekbed was such that it prevented either man from escaping the other; a collision was imminent.

At the last split second, Fargo threw the stiletto. It

flashed end over end and buried hilt-deep in the officer's heart.

Out of reflex, the man yanked back on the reins. His horse reared high, toppling the dying man over its rump into the creek.

Fargo halted short of trampling him. He was out of his saddle before the Ovaro collided with the white horse and knocked it into the trees. Fargo pulled the stiletto from the dead man's chest and glanced about to find a musketeer.

All were cowering, gawking among willows. He walked toward the trembling trio, pitching his stiletto from hand to hand and staring into their widened eyes.

One blurted in Spanish, "We surrender, *señor!* Do not kill us." He threw down his weapon and raised his hands high.

Another begged, "We go, *señor*! Please?"

"*Váyanse*," Fargo snarled.

As a unit, the terrified soldiers ran to the nearest horses, mounted up, and fled.

Fargo sheathed the stiletto, reloaded his Colt, then got in the saddle to go tell the women it was over.

The desert horses were grazing on the grassy slope.

He didn't see the shapely nuns anywhere.

But he did see six duster-clad men standing next to their horses on top of the rise opposite the one where the quail appeared.

They were watching him.

3

Fargo cupped a hand to his mouth and called out to the women. All he heard were the tweetings of a pair of scissortails swooping down to drink. He looked across the stream. They weren't over there. Neither did he see them anywhere along the creek. He turned and glanced behind. About a half-mile away, four horsemen, their all-white garb billowing behind them, raced south. They had captured the nuns, who struggled with them.

He spurred the stallion and gave chase. With each of three horses carrying two people, the powerful Ovaro closed on them rapidly. The man riding single kept glancing over his shoulder at Fargo, then shouting gibberish to his companions. Unlike the others, he was bareheaded. Fargo wanted him most of all. When the pinto came within ten yards of him, the fellow turned in the saddle, aimed a flintlock at Fargo, and fired.

The shot whizzed past Fargo's head. He drew his Colt and shot the man off his mount.

The nuns were twisting violently, trying to wrench free of their captors. Fargo came alongside the man holding Sister Monique.

Every time she reached for Fargo, the man swerved away. The Trailsman drew his stiletto and moved alongside the horse again. He stabbed at the man's thigh. The man raised his leg high. During the movement Fargo checked his thrust, and the fellow yanked his reins. As the hard-running horse dug its hooves into the ground to halt, the man pulled Sister Monique to the right side of the skidding animal, away from Fargo's outstretched hand.

The horse stumbled and fell. The man and Sister Monique bit the dust. Fargo swerved left and watched helplessly as the horse and riders tumbled awkwardly.

After passing them, Fargo moved back in and came alongside the man holding Sister Camille. She too rode sideways, apparently straddling the saddle horn. Her captor held both her hands in one of his and the bridle reins in the other. When she escaped his hold and reached for Fargo's hand, the swarthy man knocked her hands away.

Fargo slashed the man's left thigh with the stiletto. The man yelped, let go of his captive, and grabbed the bloody wound. Sister Camille fell backward and tumbled through a patch of prickly pear. Fargo's right fist struck the man's jaw and knocked him from the saddle.

He coaxed the Ovaro to run faster and overtook the last of them. He made his approach so Sister Andrée would be facing him. As he came abreast of the horse, the man shouted a threat in broken English. "Come any closer, heathen, and I will kill her!"

The horses ran neck and neck, separated by an arm's length.

Fargo started dropping back to widen the gap.

The man twisted to see him.

As Fargo swung around behind the horse, he raised the pinto's head to avoid brushing the other horse's tail, then charged forward on the other side.

Sister Andrée saw the maneuver. She pressed her face against her captor's left cheek, effectively blocking his view.

Each time the man leaned back or forward to find Fargo, she moved with him to deny him the chance.

Fargo signaled her to be ready to reach out when he got in position to snatch her free. He indicated he would swing her up on the bedroll behind his saddle. When she nodded, he dug his heels into the stallion's flanks. The Ovaro charged forward.

Sister Andrée twisted free of the man's hold and held her hands out to take Fargo's waiting right hand. Their hands overlapped. When he felt her grab his wrist tightly, he encircled his fingers around one of her wrists and nodded to her.

She leapt from the horse and Fargo yanked upward. With her legs spread and the left foot hiked high, she swung up.

Fargo let go of her wrist, breaking her grip on his.

She landed on his bedroll and he felt her arms grab his waist.

Relieved of half its load, the man's mount pounded ahead and away.

Fargo reined the pinto to a halt.

The man shouted over his shoulder, "It isn't over, heathen!"

"You all right, ma'am?" Fargo asked.

"*Oui*, thank you. Camille and—"

"We'll go see," he interrupted. "Hang on."

Sister Camille sat beside the patch of prickly pear, picking needle-sharp spines out of her legs. A nasty scrape showed on her left cheek, and her knuckles were skinned.

Looking down at her, Sister Andrée asked in French, "Are you all right, Camille?"

"Yes," she muttered testily, and nodded.

"Tell her to meet us at the creek," Fargo said.

After listening to her relay his instruction, he nudged the Ovaro forward to check on Sister Monique.

Both she and her captor were on hands and knees, shaking their heads to clear them. Fargo dismounted and jerked the wobbly man erect. With his eyes riveted on the man's, their noses separated by less than an inch, Fargo asked Sister Andrée, "Can you speak this guy's language?"

"No, *monsieur*."

Fargo growled in the cross-eyed man's dark face, "I don't know if you can hear me. I don't know if you can understand me, but I'm telling you to start walking back to Mexico. *Comprende*? I said Mexico."

The shaky fellow gave no indication that he had heard or understood one word of it. Fargo spun him around and planted a boot hard on his butt. The man lurched forward, staggered, caught his balance, and glanced over his shoulder at them.

Fargo snarled, "I don't want to see you or any of your

kind again. If I do, I'll kill you on the spot. Tell your friend I said so. Now, get the hell out of here before I change my mind and shoot you."

The man ran a few clumsy paces, stumbled, and fell. He looked at Fargo, who lowered his hand to the Colt's handle. The frightened man waved him off, scrambled to his feet, and took off running.

Fargo pulled Sister Monique to her feet. Except for skinned hands and forehead, she appeared sound. "You okay, Sister?" he asked the dazed woman.

Glassy dark eyes tried to focus on his chiseled face. He slid from the saddle and told Sister Andrée, "Take the pinto and get Sister Camille. I'll help Sister Monique to the creek. Meet us there."

Sister Andrée obeyed.

Fargo cradled Sister Monique in his strong arms and headed for the willows.

After all of them were at the creek, he checked the Ovaro's hooves while the women tended to their scrapes and cuts and finally got long overdue drinks of water. He asked, "Who and what were those men? I've never seen the likes of them before."

Sister Andrée answered, "They are Arabs . . . from Morocco."

"Oh? That's interesting, different." He rolled the two words around in his geographical mind to get a fix on them. After a long pause he asked, "Morocco? Isn't that over in Africa someplace?"

"*Oui*," she replied. "Northwest Africa."

"What in blazes are they doing over here?" he wondered aloud.

She told him, "The one who caught me is called Achmid. We don't know why they came to Mexico. The first time we saw them was the same day Father Jeansonne told us the bishop ordered him to escort us to a new mission in Texas. The Moroccans saw us talking on the street where he found us. We noticed them watching."

Fargo cut in to make an observation of his own. "Who wouldn't?"

"*Pardon?*"

"Men who run around in white gowns stick out like sore thumbs."

"*Mais oui*, but that is the way Arabs dress."

"If you say so, Sister. Please continue."

"The next morning as we rode out of Mexico City, the four of them stepped out of a dark alley and blocked our path. Father Jeansonne ordered them to stand aside and let us pass. When none moved, Father Jeansonne asked their names and what they wanted. Achmid told his name, then those of the others. The one you shot and killed was Assiz. The man you let go free—that was a serious mistake, *monsieur*—is named Mahmud. The one Camille says you cut with your dagger is Hossein."

"All right," Fargo began, "that explains who and what they are, but you haven't said why they're after you. You do know. Now I want to hear it. And don't give me that we-don't-know crap, or I'll leave you stranded right here."

She answered softly but angrily, "The Arabs offered Father Jeansonne a small bag of gold to let them have us for their harems. Achmid said that none of them had ever had a nun, that he understood nuns were pure, and we excited them, and they had to have us no matter what the price."

"And what did Father Jeansonne have to say about that?"

"He struck Achmid's face with his crop and told us to proceed onward. As we hurried away, they shook their fists and shouted obscenities in Arabic at us. We were petrified, truly frightened, *monsieur*."

"I would imagine so," Fargo agreed. "Then they caught up with you," he said flatly.

"*Oui*. All that day we watched for them. When we didn't see them following us, Father Jeansonne finally decided he'd taught them a lesson with the crop. We put the whole incident out of our minds. Then, two days before we got to the big river, we saw them riding with the soldiers behind us. Father Jeansonne knew immediately they were up to no good. Our Arabians outdistanced them quite easily. But they chased us day and night. You know the rest."

Fargo wondered if he really did. Buying women was one thing; it happened. Hell, men often killed to get females. But he'd never known of four to chase *three* halfway across the country. There were simply too many lovely, shapely *señoritas* in Mexico for them to settle on nuns. There had to be more that she wasn't telling. But he didn't press for it.

"Ladies, I will say this for the Moroccans. They do have a discerning eye for good-looking women. All of you would be queens in harems." He lowered his gaze to Sister Andrée's slightly bulging abdomen—slowly, so they would notice.

Sister Andrée cleared her throat and asked, "We go, *monsieur?*"

"Yes," he muttered, and stuck his left boot in the stirrup.

He led them up the grassy slope, through the rock formation, to the top of the rise, where he paused. From the high vantage point he could see for several miles. The dead Moroccan, Assiz, lay where he fell, his horse grazing nearby. The one he'd kicked in the ass had stopped to sit on a rock. Achmid and Hossein had come back and found him. Fargo had expected that. What he hadn't expected to see were the six horsemen walking their horses toward the trio.

Fargo urged the Ovaro down the side of the rise. Over his shoulder he voiced one of the few French words in his vocabulary, "Come along, *mademoiselles*, let's see how far we can ride before sundown."

One of the women, not Sister Andrée, blurted, "*Parlez-vous français, monsieur?*"

He grinned and answered from his equally limited German vocabulary, "*Nein, fräulein.*"

By sunset they had not reached the Nueces River, which he knew stretched somewhere ahead. He did stop, though, so they could go behind bushes while he visited an outcrop of rocks nearby. Then it was back in the saddles to move on.

About eight o'clock, if the Big Dipper could be trusted, they arrived on the south bank of the river. While the sisters dismounted to stretch kinks from their tired bod-

ies and water their mounts, Fargo did not. He'd seen a speck of light in the distance beyond the river. Now that he studied it, he saw two more left of it. That meant houses, not small campfires. Satisfied that they were near a ranch, he dismounted and watered the pinto.

Sister Monique reached to remove her bedroll from her bay gelding. Fargo stopped her, saying, "No, Sister, leave it in place. We aren't camping here."

Sister Andrée spun to face him and said rather acidly, "Why not? We are exhausted. This has been a tiring day."

"I know that," he agreed dryly. "Only tonight I think you might get to sleep in a bed."

Her change in attitude was instantaneous. "Oh? That would be nice, very nice."

She told the others what he said.

Sister Monique came and embraced him tightly. When Sister Andrée scolded her severely, snapping her fingers harshly several times, she stepped back and looked down.

Fargo felt sorry for her, angry at Sister Andrée. He said, "I believe there's a ranch on the other side. When we get there, you keep that cutting tongue quiet, Sister Andrée. One caustic peep out of you and I'll turn you belly-down over my knees and give you a long overdue paddling. Do I make myself clear?"

"*Oui*," she snapped.

About a mile from the river they came to a pair of tall columns made of native stone. On the wrought-iron framework that arched above the wide gateway was the letter M on an upward curved bar, all but invisible against the nearly black sky.

Fargo kept his gaze fixed on the softly lit window he'd been using as a beacon to guide them in. Then, doing what he knew all seafarers did on dark nights at sea, he raised his line of vision to stare several degrees above the unseen horizon. The rooflines of three structures were easy enough for him to identify. The window beacon straight ahead was on the lower floor of a two-story house. A long stone's throw to the left of the house stood a huge building that he figured was a combination stable and hay barn. Farther left was the long, low roofline of

the bunkhouse, where he saw two other pale-yellow squares of light.

Fargo and the nuns proceeded on toward the one light, now less than an eighth of a mile away. Up ahead, two dogs started barking. Seconds later the lamps were snuffed out.

The barkings became louder; the dogs were running toward them. Fargo said, "Hold your feet up a tad, ladies, but keep going."

"Tad?" Sister Andrée asked. "What is tad?"

"Means 'some,' ma'am. Don't make it too easy for the dogs to bite you."

When she repeated his warning to the others, he heard them gasp, then start chattering in concerned tones. Sister Andrée made it a flat statement, not a question when she remarked, "You will shoot the dogs."

"No, ma'am. They're doing their job warning everybody that strangers are coming. Just keep your feet up and everything will be all right."

The dogs rushed up growling. One snapped at Fargo's left boot repeatedly. Twice he heard one of the nuns say, "Shoo." Apparently the term for get-away-from-me was the same in languages other than English. The dogs annoyed them all the way to the big house.

As they rode up in front of it, a man on Fargo's left shouted over the dog's incessant barkings, "All right, mister, that's far enough. Eight guns are on you, so I wouldn't try anything fancy if I was you." Fargo reined to a halt. The man said, "Opal, call off those dogs, will ya?"

A woman with a heavy southern inflection in her voice spoke from the dark porch. "Major, c'mere. You too, Lady Ruth. Git up here."

The dogs made final yaps and went to her.

Now that it was quiet, the man spoke normally. Fargo stared toward him when the whiskey voice asked, "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Name's Skye Fargo. In case you can't see them, I have three women with me. Nuns. We're on our way to Cowtown. We stopped at the river to water our horses. I

saw your lights and decided to come on in. Mister, these women are dog-tired. We've been fighting off Arabs most of the day." The instant he mentioned the Moroccans he knew he'd made a mistake.

"Uh, huh," the whiskey voice said dryly, "and we've been fighting off Eskimos all day. Three women, huh? What say you lemme hear 'em speak."

Sister Andrée answered immediately. "It is so what he says, *monsieur*. We did fight the Moroccans. We are tired. Very tired." She told the others to say something.

One after the other they spoke in French. Fargo presumed their brief remarks were also pleas.

A new female voice having the same thick southern inflection spoke from the porch. "Aw, hell, Mama, they ain't gonna bother us none. Let 'em come on in the house. I ain't never saw no Catholic nun afore, or somebody from France."

"Shut your mouth, Pearl," the mother barked. "Red'll take care of this. Whatcha think, Red?"

Fargo spoke first. "Ma'am, we're peaceable folks. We don't mean you any harm. Right now these ladies need to rest. We'll be on our way in the morning."

Red said, "Pearl, step back inside and light a lamp. Bring it out here so I can take a gander at 'em. When she does, I want to see you people get off those horses and walk toward the lamp one at a time with your hands up. Go on, Pearl, get the lamp."

Fargo didn't have to tell Sister Andrée what to say to the nuns. However, he did remind her of Red's warning to raise their hands.

The lamp was lit. Pearl came onto the porch and held it out over the railing. Fargo scanned the faces fixed on them and the weapons aimed at him. Six Mexican ranchhands, all armed with rifles, flanked a bearded, older white man Fargo reckoned owned the whiskey voice. The old man gripped a Smith & Wesson.

Opal stood with one hand on the porch rail, the other pointing a pistol at Fargo. She was a thin woman with a long face. A robe was drawn tight over her nightgown, the hem of which showed below the outer garment. Her expression conveyed a natural surly disposition.

The two dogs, both English shepherds, sat on the porch at the top of the steps, their eyes watching the strangers.

Fargo decided Pearl was still in her teens. She too was slim like her mother. Her face, however, lacked the hardness of the older woman's. She also had on a robe, only it wasn't snugged tight. Her legs-apart stance caused the front of the unbelted garment to spread open, and Fargo saw she wore only drawers under the housecoat. He watched her gaze roam down his body, then drift back up and stop on his eyes. He'd seen that same lustful look in the eyes of plenty of women. He would have to watch out for Pearl. She was a hellion in want of a wrestling match.

Fargo dismounted slowly, raised his hands, and stepped toward the light. When the old man ordered it, he turned and faced him.

Red said, "Shoot him, Opal, if he so much as moves a muscle." He moved to Fargo and relieved him of his Colt. Stepping back, he said, "All right, big feller, you can let your hands down now. Tell one of the females to git down and come stand by you."

"Sister, tell Sister Monique what he said."

Upon hearing her name, Sister Monique dismounted. Sister Andrée told her what to do. She walked into the lamplight and turned around.

Red grunted, "Okay, send the next one."

In turn, Sisters Camille and Andrée joined Fargo. When Sister Andrée turned her profile to the mother and daughter, Opal gasped, "Why, she's in a family way! I knowed them popes didn't have no morals and used their nuns for pleasure. My word!"

"Aw, Mama," Pearl chuckled, "she ain't got no baby in her. She's just getting fat 'round the middle."

"Hush up, Pearl. I say she's pg." Opal looked at the old man. "They look okay to me, Red, but I ain't taking papist whores in my home. All of 'em can stay in the barn, or be on their way. If they stay, I want 'em off the property first thing in the morning. Pearl don't need to be around 'em."

"The barn's fine, ma'am," Fargo replied. "We'll leave at dawn. Thank you for your hospitality, ma'am."

"Don't smart-mouth me, mister," she snapped, "or I'll sic my dogs on you."

Fargo believed she would do exactly that. He nodded to her, touched the brim of his hat, then started leading the Ovaro toward the barn. The nuns followed with their mounts, Red walking beside him. The old man muttered an apology. "Sorry, big feller, but I'll have to keep your gun till you're ready to leave."

"No problem. Coming through the entrance, I made out a Rocking M on the arch. What's the M for?"

"Stands for McCurdy. Lucas McCurdy owns the place. Him and most of the men—all the good hands—are taking a herd to the stockyards up at St. Louie. Left me and the Mexicans behind to watch over things. Lucas's been gone 'bout three weeks now. They should be somewhere on the Baxter Springs Trail."

"You had any trouble?"

"Naw, nothing we couldn't take care of. A bunch of those Lipan Apaches came along, but we chased 'em off. They'd eat you out of house and home if you let 'em. Other'n them it's been quiet 'round here. It's them wild-assed Comanche we gotta watch out for. So far we been lucky. Comanche ain't showed up in a long time. You from Texas? Don't sound like it, if you are."

"No. Guess you could say I'm more from the North. West, mostly. I don't stay in one place too long."

"Uh, can I ask you something I've been wondering about?"

"Sure. Anything."

"How come you're with these foreigners? Is that one really foot-broke?"

Fargo chuckled. "Looks like it, but I haven't checked under her habit to see for myself. *Federales* and four Arabs chased them across the Rio Grande. I happened to be there at the time."

"No shit! You really did fight it out with some Arabs?"

"Killed one, cut one, chased off the others. Any chance of getting something decent for the women to eat before bedtime?"

"Heck, yes. I'll have one of the boys bring something. Sara and Hector Montoya live in the cook shack behind the big house. Sara does all the fixing. I'm sure she has some leftover fried chicken. We got plenty of fresh milk too."

Red stopped outside the entrance to the barn. "Wait here till I get a lantern lit so you can see your way. It's mighty dark in there." He disappeared through the large maw. Seconds later the interior lit up. The old man appeared in the opening and waved them inside.

The barn was indeed huge—cavernous—and as Fargo had predicted, had horse stalls. A row of six jutted from the wall they had just come through. Small hills of hay were stacked or piled everywhere, including the loft, which could be reached by a stepladder.

Red said, "There are oats in those bags over there." He pointed to them and added, "Help yourself to all you want. Sorry about you having to sleep in the hay, but Opal, she ain't one to have any sympathy for unwed mothers."

"The barn will do us fine, Red. We appreciate it. Don't apologize."

"Well, it ain't right, but there's not a damn thing I can do about it. I'll go see about the vittles. Need anything before I go?"

"Don't think so. See you at dawn."

He watched the old man walk away shaking his head. Within minutes the Ovaro and Arabians were relieved of their burdens, put in stalls, and watered and fed. Closing the stall gate, Fargo told Sister Andrée, "Have the *mademoiselles* use the hay back there to make beds, then spread their bedrolls over them." He nodded toward the rear of the barn, then looked at the ladder and said, "I'll be in the hay up there. If you become frightened, yell and I'll be right down."

She nodded and asked, "We eat, *monsieur*?"

It's a wonderful idea, he thought, but said, "Food will be along shortly. I'm not hungry, so I won't join you. We leave at sunup. Good night, Sister. You ladies sleep well."

He climbed the ladder, gripping his bedroll with one

hand. After making his bed, he took off all his clothes and stretched out to sleep. He was staring at the lantern's soft-yellow glow on the rafters when he heard somebody enter the barn.

Pearl half-shouted, "Anybody hungry? I got fried chicken, biscuits, and a pail of milk. Where are you, big man? I'll bring you a real juicy piece."

He grimaced and said, "Up here, ma'am, but the food's for the nuns. Sister Andrée, the little lady is here with your meals."

"*Merci*," she answered.

He listened to them congregate at the lantern on the ground just inside the opening.

After a couple of minutes Pearl commented, "Damnation, you were hungry." In a louder voice she warned, "Hey, up there, big man, they ain't gonna leave nothing. Want me to bring a thigh up to you . . . or a breast?"

It was clear to him that Pearl was determined to get in the loft with him. He felt trapped. There was no way out of accommodating her. "No," he sighed loudly. "Bring me a bony back, or that which went over the fence last. A cup of milk if you have enough."

He listened to her come up the ladder, then watched her silhouette emerge at the top. She knee-walked to where he lay and held out a tin cup and a piece of chicken. He propped on an elbow to drink the milk. She knelt next to him at the waist and stared down into the darkness shielding his crotch.

Fargo studied her over the rim of his cup. The housecoat was wide open, revealing a pair of breasts about the size and shape of Bartletts picked early from the tree. Tiny nipples begged for attention from the small pink-tan circles from which they protruded. She was a slim person and underweight for her height—he guessed she might be five feet tall—and her bone structure showed. He could make out her rib cage, breastbone, and shoulder bones quite easily. Her tummy was flat as an ironing board. Curly dark-red hair cut short covered her head. She was staring down, trying to penetrate the dark spot with her large eyes. It was as though a beautiful snake held her captivated.

He held the empty cup out to her and broke her reverie. She blinked and said, "I ain't ever saw a man as big an' purdy as you. Do you reckon I could just lay here a minute or two an' feel your big ol' muscles? I'd be eternal grateful if you would. Please?"

Fargo reached up and slipped the housecoat from her shoulders. It fell behind her.

She hooked her thumbs in the waist of her drawers and drew them down below her hip bones. Her breathing quickened as she whispered, "Are you gonna do it to me? Take me, mister. Please put it in me."

He took the tiny nipples between his thumbs and index fingers, and pulled and pinched on them.

Pearl gasped, "Oh, oh, that feels so good. Do it some more. Pull on 'em harder."

He gave them a gentle tug and asked, "Honey, have you ever been with a man before?"

Her Adam's apple bobbed. "Once," she admitted. "Back in Kentucky, me and William did it out at Donner's Pond the night afore my folks left for here. I been wanting to do it again ever since. Cain't get my mind to quit thinking 'bout how good it feels. Pinch 'em again so's I'll know I ain't dreaming."

He pulled her down onto him and took most all of her left breast into his mouth and sucked hard. Her fingernails dug into his biceps as she groaned, "Oh, God, I feel that all the way down to my . . . Oh! Suck harder, mister. Do the other one too. I'd be grateful—oh, God!—if you'd squeeze my butt while you're at it."

Sliding his lips to her right breast, he gripped her narrow buttock cheeks. He felt them tighten as he squeezed. Writhing, she moaned, "I'm getting all dizzy . . . cain't see nothing." She started shivering and gasped, "Why am I so thirsty all a sudden?" She started gulping and trembling. "My insides . . . What's happening down there? I cain't stop it."

He rolled both hard nipples between his teeth, then kissed her breasts and asked, "How do you want it, honey?"

"I don't know," she mewed. "Ever which way?"

He rolled her off him and slid a hand down over her

belly to one of the largest patches of bushy hair he'd ever felt. He moved his middle finger down through the curly patch and felt along the swollen, very moist lips.

Raising her hips, she whimpered, "I'm on fire . . . so wonderful. William, he didn't do this to me. Don't quit, mister, please don't."

He eased his finger into the opening. The hot membrane felt soft as velvet. When he made a small circle, she moaned, "Oh, God, your finger sure is big, but it feels wonderful. Stick it in all the way and wiggle it 'round. Owee, that's good. Faster, big feller." She started bouncing and rolling her rump.

He withdrew the finger and turned her face down on the hay, then raised her onto her knees and knelt behind her.

Spreading her knees wide apart, she gasped, "You gonna horse-screw me, mister?"

"Honey, you're tight as a mouse's ear down there. I'm not all that sure I can get in. We're going to find out, though. Are you ready?"

"Oh, God, I'll die if it don't fit. Go ahead and try. Hurry." He parted her lower lips with his thumbs and positioned his blood-swollen crown between them. She gasped, "Oh, my God, that's big, lots bigger'n I remember William's being."

Fargo eased the head into the tight opening and paused.

Pearl's entire body stiffened. Her back arched and her head came up. Widened eyes looked at him from over her shoulder as she groaned, "Mister, is it gonna hurt me any more than it already does?"

"At first it probably will. Do you want to stop? Now is the time to say."

"No," she moaned. "I'd be wondering for the rest of my life 'bout what I missed. I gotta know right now. I'm tough. I'll grit my teeth if it hurts bad enough. I won't yell, either. I promise I won't. Go ahead and put some more in."

He gripped her by the hips, lifted, and began a slow entry. He felt her ass tense an instant before she choked a long-drawn-out "Aaaaagghhh!" He pulled back on hips

and shoved most all of his hard member in. Pearl screamed, "Aaaayyaaaiiii!"

One of the nuns was heard to gasp, another to moan.

When he withdrew partway, she gasped, "What're you doing? Don't take it out. Please don't! I want more. I want all of it. Please give it to me." She pressed back and forced it in.

He went deep and started pumping and gyrating. Pearl whimpered, but met his movements with some of her own. Within seconds her tunnel was well-slickened, and her childlike whimpers changed to a new tone, one of a woman enveloped in pure ecstasy, uttering the blissful moans and whimpers that arise from a long-awaited full satisfaction. Young Pearl McCurdy had passed into womanhood in less than ten full strokes of his throbbing organ.

"Harder, big man," she begged, "and go faster . . . deeper. Oh, God, don't stop . . . please, don't stop."

He let go of her hips, reached up, and cupped her breasts. She moaned deliriously and shoved back to capture all of that giving her so much great pleasure. He pulled on her nipples and thrust hard and deep. She mewed, "I'm in heaven . . . it's so beautiful."

When he flooded her sheath, it contracted, and she gasped, "Oh, oh . . . I'm thirsty again . . . dry as a bone." He felt her shudder.

He withdrew his spent member and pulled her to him. She looked at him and smiled. Breathing hard, she asked, "Would you kiss me, big man?"

Fargo embraced her and kissed her openmouthed. She fell limp in his arms. When he broke the kiss, she sighed mightily and long, then said, "Mister, I know you ain't gonna stay here and I know you won't take me with you, but I want you to know I'm gonna remember you and this here hayloft for all of my born days. I'm so happy."

He lay back and put her head in the crook of his shoulder. "Pearl, you did good tonight. Maybe we'll meet again one of these days. When and if we do, I will be pleased to make love with you."

She turned and kissed him openmouthed.

The lantern flickered, then went out.

The rancher's daughter nuzzled the Trailsman's throat as they fell asleep.

During the night one of the nuns started snoring and it woke him. When she grunted, Fargo presumed Sister Andrée's elbow was responsible. The barn fell quiet again.

Later, his eyes popped open when the dogs started barking in that strange way dogs often do. He listened to them begin to whimper, only to end the whine abruptly with a clipped bark, as though they were confused. He nudged Pearl and asked her to listen and tell him what she thought.

She mumbled drowsily, "Ain't nothing, darling. They act like that when a polecat wanders in. I'd be grateful if you'd hold my left one while I go back to sleep."

He did and lay listening to the dogs. After a few minutes one yelped, then it became silent once more. Closing his eyes, he got a whiff of the obnoxious odor spewed by the skunk.

An hour later he was awake and listening again. This time thunder rumbled far beyond the Nueces. Fargo wondered if he'd ever get any real shut-eye this night. He closed his eyes and willed his mind to shut down.

The Ovaro knickering snapped them back open for the fourth time. He bolted up into a sitting position, the sudden movement flinging Pearl backward onto the hay.

She gasped, "What's wrong?"

"Smoke."

4

Reaching for his clothes, Fargo shouted, "Fire!" The warning was lost in a clap of thunder that shook the barn. As the loud sound subsided, he heard gunfire. Pulling on his clothes, he listened to a man shout orders. "Smoke the bitches outside! Poteet, you and Bohannon take our A-rab friends and go kill those bastards shooting at us. We'll stay here and catch the whores as they run out."

Fargo went down the ladder and into the opening. Flames licked on the roof of the big house. A light breeze blew the smoke toward the barn and bunkhouse, where all the shooting was taking place. In the dull-gray early-morning sky above the ranch hovered a mammoth dark cloud. Fargo didn't see any of the visitors.

Pearl ran past him, screaming, "Mama! Git outta the house, Mama!" As she ran, she dropped her housecoat to the ground.

Fargo yelled to the sisters, "Turn our horses out." He ran toward the burning house.

The dry wood of the house made it a tinderbox. The flames were spreading rapidly. A window on the upper floor exploded, showering glass outward. Flames burst through the opening.

Pearl leapt onto the porch, yanked the screen door open, and ran inside, yelling for her mother. As Fargo put a foot on the front steps, two duster-clad riders holding torches came around the house. They laughed and one yelled to the other, "Fry the big sonsabitch, Harvey, before he can get back inside."

Fargo dodged the two torches hurled at him, then dived through the screen door. Slugs chewed into woodwork behind him. He glanced about the spacious room, which had a cathedral ceiling. Smoke billowed down the staircase directly in front of him. Pearl was halfway up the stairs. He shouted, "No, Pearl. I'll get her!"

The young woman kept going.

As he ran to the stairway, a section of the ceiling erupted in flames. Coming onto the top landing, he pulled his neckerchief up over his nose. Smoke filled the hallway separating the upstairs rooms. He couldn't see the girl. Neither could he hear her; the roar of the fire was too great.

Plunging into the smoke, he groped along the wall on his left to find a door. His hand seized a doorknob. He turned it enough to release the catch, then kicked it open and hopped aside. Flames leapt out. The room was being consumed by fire. He told himself if Pearl or her mother were inside, she was already burned to a crisp.

He felt his way to the next door and repeated his cautious opening. A monstrous cloud of smoke gushed out into the hall. As he darted inside, he heard gagging in the fire sounds. "Pearl? Opal? Hang on, I'm coming!"

As he groped his way across the smoke-filled room, his left boot struck something large and soft. He reached down and touched an arm. Picking her up, he felt clothing. Draping the mother's limp body over his massive shoulder, he shouted, "Pearl! Where are you, girl?" She didn't answer. Neither did he hear the earlier choking sound.

The ceiling above the bed caved in, bringing fire with it. For an instant he saw the four-poster, and Pearl wasn't on it. Then the fire backed him into the hall.

Fargo looked toward the top landing and saw raging flames blocked it. He turned and went the other way. After taking two steps, he tripped over Pearl's body and fell. Grabbing both women's wrists, he dragged mother and daughter to the end of the hall, where he found a closed window. Fargo raised it, stuck his head out, and inhaled deeply as he glanced about the fire-lit grounds.

Steady gunfire came from the direction of the barn and bunkhouse, which he couldn't see.

One of the arsonists yelled from the side of the house, "Shit, they ain't in here."

Another called back, "No, they ain't. They're in the goddamn bunkhouse. Get Joe Bob and c'mon with me and Pete."

Fargo couldn't remain in the hall, and to drop the unconscious women to the ground from this height could prove fatal to one or both. He whistled for the Ovaro.

It trotted around the corner of the house and halted, its ears perked and swiveling to locate Fargo. He whistled again and said, "Up here, boy."

The pinto raised his head, looked at him, then moved to stand below the window. Fargo gripped Opal's wrists, hung her out over the stallion's back, and let go. She landed astride the horse, then toppled off.

Pearl went next. She caromed off the stallion's side and landed on top of her mother.

Fargo hung from the windowsill and dropped to the ground between his horse and the house. Coming to his feet, he slapped the Ovaro's rump to send the fearless stallion away from the raging inferno. Then, thankful that they were underweight, he picked up both women and ran to the cook shack.

The door swung open. An older Mexican woman stared out, her widened eyes reflecting her stark terror. Fargo rushed past her and heard the door slam shut behind him. The Mexican woman barred the door. He stretched the women face-down on the floor and said in Spanish, "Take care of them." He glanced at Hector cowering in the heavy shadows of a back corner. "I need a weapon, Hector. Do you have one?"

Hector nodded, but he didn't budge from the corner.

Sara opened a cupboard door and brought out Fargo's Colt and a Smith & Wesson identical to Red's. After checking both revolvers to make sure they were fully loaded, the Trailsman stuck the smaller gun under his belt and held on to the Colt. Removing the bar from the door, he told them, "Lock the door behind me. Don't come out unless a voice you know says it's all right." He

stepped outside and pulled the door shut. He heard the bar slam in place.

The barn could now be seen easily in the brightness of the fire. Glowing embers caught in the updraft of the burning house were floating down on the roof. He knew the huge barn would burst into flames any second. After glancing toward the bunkhouse and seeing that the three Moroccans and six horsemen had it surrounded and were firing into it, he ran to the barn to check on the nuns.

Running inside, he shouted, "Ladies, where are you?"

"Here," Sister Andrée answered from a horse stall.

Fargo hurried over to the stall and looked in. All three were huddled in a back corner, much fear in their eyes. Coaxing them to come out, he asked Sister Andrée if she knew how to aim and shoot a rifle.

"*Oui*," she replied.

He handed her a handful of cartridges and took the time to show her how to load and eject them. While she watched, he said, "You can't stay here, Sister. The barn too will go up in flames." As he spoke, the roof started crackling. Fargo led them to the entrance and said, "When I say so, I want all three of you to run away from here as fast as you can. Keep yourselves hidden by running with this barn between you and the bunkhouse. In case you haven't guessed, the Arabs are back. This time with six ruthless men. Run till you come to high weeds, then drop down and hide in them. Sister, I don't want to hear that rifle bark unless one of them is after you. Do you understand all of what I said?"

She nodded, then told the other two. Finished, she looked at Fargo and nodded again. "We understand. We go, *monsieur*?"

"Not yet. Stay here and watch me. If it's safe for you to start running, I'll wave to you." He stepped out and hugged the wall, moving to the corner. Peering around it, he saw two of the Moroccans and three of the duster-clad men on the near side of the bunkhouse. As he watched, two torches arced high from the far side of the bunkhouse and landed on the roof. Satisfied the no-goods had their attention on the bunkhouse, he motioned for the women to take off.

Fargo was too far away to get off clean shots. He scanned the area to find a new firing position. Off to his right stood a small shed, beyond it a large stock pen, both no better than where he was. Between the pens and bunkhouse was a corral. The corral was too far away for him to run to without being seen. A Conestoga with its canvas top and the left front wheel missing was parked in high weeds between the bunkhouse and the corner of the barn where he stood. After glancing back and seeing the nuns were well clear of the barn and running fast as gazelles, he sprinted to the derelict Conestoga. Pressing over its side, he dropped onto the bed.

The men hadn't seen him. Fargo aimed at a duster as its wearer rode around the bunkhouse, and shot the fellow off the saddle. Taking dead-aim on one of two Arabs, he squeezed the trigger and watched his target fall from his mount. The Moroccan riding behind the shot man saw his corpse topple from the saddle. Fargo was moving his sights onto the second Moroccan when the fellow spotted him. The Arab wheeled his mount as Fargo fired and missed.

Then all hell broke loose.

As the Moroccan drew the other attackers' attention to the wagon, Red and three of the Mexicans ran out of the burning building. Fargo was forced to hold his fire for fear of killing a friend. He watched helplessly as the other gunmen and Arab rode around the far end of the bunkhouse and joined the others, shooting at Red and his men, who were fighting their way to the stock pens.

Fargo vaulted from the Conestoga and hit the ground running, heading for the pens to link up with Red and the others, in case any of them made it there. On the way, he saw the two Moroccans dismount and dash inside the burning bunkhouse. "You're out of luck," he muttered.

The Moroccans' total focus on capturing the nuns allowed Red and the Mexicans to escape to the stock pens. As they came over and through the board fencing, Fargo climbed over his side of the pen. The five surviving desperadoes started circling the fenced-in area to spot targets. Fargo worked his way through the heavy boards

of the many separate pens and met up with Red in the center of them.

Out of breath, the old man slumped against a fence and said wryly, "Ain't this a helluva way to be woke up?"

"They're after the nuns."

"Did Opal and Pearl get away?"

"They're with the cook."

"What do you reckon we ought to do, big feller? I see you got your gun back."

Fargo watched the circling riders as best he could through gaps in the fences. The Mexicans were lying on the ground with their rifles poked through the lowest gaps. "Well, Red, this is as good a place as any to fight from. There's no way for them to charge us. They know getting us out of here would be harder than pulling wisdom teeth . . . providing they don't think to check the cook shack."

As he spoke, the barn burst into flames, the heat from it felt even at this distance.

Red slammed his hat to the ground and cried, "Aw, shit! Lucas is gonna kill me dead when he comes back and finds his place got burnt to the ground."

Enormous raindrops pattered the fine soil. A bolt of lightning cracked and exploded nearby. Fargo and Red peered over the fence. Debris from the cook shack rained down.

"That does it," Fargo muttered. "Now they will assume the nuns burned to death in the big house. My guess is they will leave after checking the shack to make sure."

As though on cue, the riders stopped circling and rode to join the pair of Moroccans galloping toward the cook shack. Before they got there, the foreboding clouds dumped a deluge of water onto the ranch. Through the sudden torrential downpour Fargo saw the riders wheel and head back. They shot past the stock pens at a dead run, heading toward the Nueces.

"Wonder what brought all that on?" Red asked.

"Good question," Fargo replied, a frown forming on his forehead. "Let's go find out."

Red told the Mexicans to come on. All of them began scaling fences. They plodded up to the smoldering remains of the shack, knowing at once that nobody could have possibly survived. They kicked through the debris to find the bodies, but found none. Red and Fargo exchanged puzzled looks.

Fargo suggested, "Red, they got out in time. They're somewhere around here. You and your men start looking for them. I'll go round up the nuns. See you between the house and barn."

Fargo headed in the direction the Frenchwomen had run. Nearing what he considered the danger zone, he started yelling his name and for Sister Andrée to hold her fire.

"We are over here, *monsieur*," he heard her say.

He kicked his way through the weeds and found the women huddled close together and sopping wet. Extending his hand to help them up, he said, "It's all over, girls. You are safe now."

Sister Andrée needed more assurance than that. "You killed the Moroccans?"

"One. The other two have headed south."

"Then we are not safe, *monsieur*. They will come again."

Walking back to the house, he commented, "Sister, I can't believe they want you women for harem girls. There's more to it than that. You're keeping something from me. I have to know what it is they are after if I'm to protect you properly. So tell me now."

She answered after a long pause. "You will learn when we arrive at our destination."

"Before he died, Father Jeansonne mentioned something about a secret. Is that what they want from you?"

"Yes, *monsieur*, it is. We are honor-bound not to reveal the secret until we arrive at our destination. So please do not attempt to force it from us. It wouldn't do you any good if you did, because each of us holds only a part of the secret, and we would die before giving it up. Any one piece of the secret is meaningless without having all of it. Please do not inquire again, *monsieur*."

Honor was one trait Fargo understood and respected.

He nodded and said, "I won't probe. Just tell me one thing."

"Oui, monsieur?"

"Where do I take you once we get to Cowtown? A Catholic mission?"

"No," she answered, and said no more.

He shook his head. Getting information out of her was indeed harder than pulling wisdom teeth.

Punching through the downpour, he saw Red had found the two women. Pearl had on one of Sara's dresses. It was large enough to wrap around her slender body twice. She smiled at Fargo, but her mother viewed him through squinted eyes.

Red suggested, "Only one dry place left, big feller. The implement shed. C'mon, I'll show the way."

The shed was barely large enough to hold them. Once inside, Fargo posed a question that had been bothering him. "Ma'am, how come your dogs didn't let us know those men were around? Where are the dogs? I haven't seen or heard them since all this started."

"I've been wondering the same," she admitted. "It ain't like Major and Lady Ruth to take off on their own. Ain't ever happened afore." She looked at the old man leaning against tools on the front wall by the doorway. "You hear or see 'em, Red?"

He shook his head.

Fargo watched the rain slacken. The downpour had done a fair job of putting out the fire that left the barn in shambles. A few flames still showed, but mostly it smoldered. At least the horses got out, he thought. He'd buy another saddle, tack, bedroll, and saddlebags when they got to San Antonio, maybe have a Mexican leatherworker make him a new saddle case for the Sharps.

He reached to take the rifle from Sister Andrée.

Clutching it, she asked, "Let me hold it, *monsieur*. I will put it back in its holder when we leave."

"Oh? Where is the holder?"

"We carried everything outside after letting the horses loose. Didn't you see it?"

"No, I was too busy. My bedroll?"

"Sister Camille brought your bedroll down. Everything was saved, *monsieur*."

Pleased, he nodded, glanced at Sister Camille, and shot her a wink. She began a smile, but checked it when Sister Andrée admonished her with a hard stare and one snap of her fingers. So, Fargo thought, one snap with a stare means don't do it. He resumed looking out the doorway.

Five minutes later it stopped raining. He headed for the barn. The others followed single-file. They were standing, looking down at the saddles and other gear when one of the Mexicans whispered nervously, "*Señor*, Indians are here."

They turned and looked where the Mexican pointed. At least twenty mounted and armed Indians approached at a slow walk from the remains of the cook shack.

Fargo warned everybody, "Don't try to run from them. Stay close together until we find out what they're up to. I'll do all the talking or signs. Red, keep your gun holstered, but tell your men to lay their rifles on the ground when the Indians get here. You women try not to show any fear of them."

As Sister Andrée repeated his warning, Red told the Mexicans. Fargo assumed a relaxed stance and watched them ride in slowly. They halted a yard or so away from him. Up close, they looked like Comanche. The Mexicans threw down their weapons.

The Indians' leader, a tall muscular man of about thirty, flicked the deadly pogamoggan gripped in his right hand. The party immediately divided and contained the white and brown people in the semicircle they formed. Because none wore warpaint, Fargo didn't know if they were a hunting or a war party. The leader lowered his Indian-style mace and gently swung the round, smooth river rock back and forth while he studied his captives' faces.

Fargo asked, "Do you speak English?"

He got no reply. He watched the powerfully built Indian scan each of the women from head to toe, then focus his attention on the nuns, especially Sister Andrée. Finally, he slid off his pony and took a lance from a

young warrior. Moving in front of Sister Andrée, he tapped her belly with the blunt end of the lance.

Fargo heard her fingers snap three times. As a unit the three nuns stepped back one pace and raised their hands high. The Indian stiffened and furrowed his brow.

Fargo muttered, "Ladies, what in blazes do you think you're doing? He'll kill you with that pogamoggan, bash your skulls in."

Fargo turned in time to see them make ugly faces and form their hands into flesh-ripping claws. The Indian took a half-step backward, then another when they started chanting in French.

The entire party of Indians became nervous, urged their mounts to back up a mite. Several of the warriors actually gasped. The leader bent cautiously, keeping his eyes on the scary nuns, and collected the three rifles. Warily, he watched the chanting sisters while he handed the rifles to his men. He looked at Fargo for a studious moment before he shifted his gaze on the McCurdy women. Opal, thin-lipped as ever, glowered at him defiantly. Pearl fainted.

The man gestured for Fargo and Red to take their guns out of their holsters and pitch them on the ground at his feet. Fargo advised Red they better do it, and complied with the redman's silent order. He squatted, picked them up, and tossed them to waiting hands.

The nuns leaned forward and clawed the air. Their mouths opened and they worked their tongues much like a reptile does. When they started hissing loudly, the brave fellow backed into his pony's face, then spun and leapt astride it.

He grunted at length to his men, two of whom grunted back, shaking their heads. The leader held out his pogamoggan and threatened the two warriors with it.

They dismounted instantly and stepped to Opal and Pearl. Opal began a rebellious complaint that included many sexual epithets, all screamed venomously. The warrior ignored Opal's flailing fists. He grabbed her around the waist and hoisted the angry woman over his shoulder.

Pearl never felt the hands that lifted her at the crotch

and right upper arm. The warrior held her above his head while he went back to his mount.

Fargo knew that to intercede was tantamount to committing suicide. But it wasn't in him to simply stand there and let them take the women without him putting up a fight. He moved to grab Opal. As he reached for her, stars exploded in his brain. He reeled and fell faceup on the ground. Through blurred vision he watched the party ride away.

Red rushed to Fargo and pulled him into a sitting position. Fargo shook his head to clear it. The stars twinkled out. His brain stopped swirling. He stared at the departing Indians. At the demolished shack, the group parted to pass around it. Fargo saw them drop his and the others weapons to the ground.

Their leader looked back and shouted in clear English, "I give back your guns, white man. Shoot those women. They have bad spirits."

Red growled to his men, "Saddle up our horses, boys. We're going after 'em."

The Mexicans' body language said they didn't want to do that. Fargo could understand their reluctance. Normally, one did not face a party of Comanche like they had without losing their scalps. To go after the Indians would be stupid.

Fargo said, "Wouldn't do any good, Red. There's too many of them, and they have us outgunned."

"Lucas will have my hide for letting all this happen—them burning down his place, my giving up his womenfolk without putting up a fight." Cocking his head, he squinted an eye at Fargo and censured, "Mister, you and these foreigners are to blame. None of this would have happened if you hadn't come along." Having said his piece, the old man strode to go fetch his gun.

Sister Andrée asked, "*Monsieur*, what will happen to the woman and her daughter?"

Fargo shook his head. "Hard to say, ma'am, but it won't be nice. With luck, maybe they'll escape in a day or two." While he said it, he didn't believe it.

Ten minutes later they rode away from the barn, fol-

lowing in the Indians' tracks. Fargo halted to collect his Colt and Sharps.

Red sat on an upturned box nearby, staring glumly at the ground between his boots. He glanced up at Fargo and spoke in a somber voice. "Big, feller, you can forget what I said back there. Now that I've had time to cool down and think on it, without you and them nuns the Comanche would've took our scalps for dang sure."

Fargo nodded. "Yeah, all of us got lucky. Tell you what, old-timer. I'll make it my business to find Lucas McCurdy and tell him what happened. My guess is he will understand."

"Hope so," Red replied in a hollow tone.

Sister Andrée said, "We go, *monsieur*?"

Fargo nudged the Ovaro to walk.

A quarter-mile from the house they found the dogs. Both had been shot to death with arrows. And that told Fargo the Comanche had arrived first. They had held up after hearing gunfire and waited until the attack was over before coming in to pick over the leavings. Feeling over the goose egg the pogamoggan left on the back of his head, Fargo looked ahead.

The Comanche were nowhere in sight.

5

The McCurdy ranch lay far behind Fargo, out of sight but not forgotten. The Comanche had veered west after riding less than two miles from the smoldering barn. The Trailsman silently vowed to find and retrieve Opal and Pearl after completing his promise to the priest.

A field of pretty bluebonnets stretched from the outskirts of San Antonio to the far slope of the hill Fargo and the nuns topped. Sister Camille, riding behind him, emitted a tiny, pleasured gasp when the bluebonnets came into view.

Entering the wildflowers, he motioned Sister Andrée to move up alongside the Ovaro. She appeared next to him, looked at him questioningly. He said, "Ma'am, I intend to do some serious drinking and play a few hands of draw after we get to town. So I don't want to hear you say, 'We go, *monsieur*,' till after the sun comes up in the morning. I'll get rooms for you ladies in one of the better hotels, one where you can have a bath."

Her expression left no doubt that she disapproved of what he said. In a crisp no-nonsense tone, she replied, "You will leave us to fend for ourselves while you go drink whiskey and gamble? *Monsieur*, I remind you of the Moroccans. They will try again to capture us. You gave your word to Father Jeansonne you would—"

"Ma'am, I was there and I know what I told him," Fargo cut in. "You don't need to keep reminding me. There's only two Arabs left, and they headed south. I don't think you have anything to worry about. A good night's sleep and we'll be on our way."

"Hmnph," she snorted. "*Monsieur*, you are a fool to believe the Moroccans won't return. Arabs do not give up so easily. Achmid will—"

His upraised hand silenced her. "Sister, with all due respect, I don't want to hear any more." He spurred the pinto and rode ahead.

They entered San Antonio on a narrow, dusty street lined with adobe hovels. A large flock of guinea hens and yellow chickens scattered squawking in advance of the stallion. Midway down the dusty corridor a lop-eared mongrel started barking. Several curious children came and ran alongside the nuns. Women appeared in doorways, crossed themselves at the sight of the habits, then told the youngsters to stop annoying the nuns. A pall of smoke from hundreds of cooking fires within the town carried mouth-watering aromas of Mexican food. Fargo inhaled deeply.

They rode past the old tumbledown Mission Alamo to a stream. Businesses lined its banks. Fargo spotted a hotel and a cantina next to it. He dismounted in front of the hotel. After stepping onto the porch, he paused and looked back. The women were still in their saddles, staring at him. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Sister Andrée answered, "*Monsieur*, this is a terrible place. There must be better."

"No, lady, there isn't. You can get down and come on inside or sit there fuming till morning. Makes no difference to me." He continued across the porch and went inside.

A tall gangly fellow with tallow-colored mutton-chop sideburns and a broad smile greeted Fargo. "Good afternoon." The man peered through the doorway at the women. "Welcome to the Texas Rose." He glanced at Fargo and asked, "How many rooms, sir?" He turned the registration ledger for Fargo's signature or mark and removed the pencil from behind his ear.

Fargo wrote his name and replied, "They'll tell you how many. I'll be in the cantina. Which way is the nearest stable and a place for me to take a bath?"

"The stable's on down past Elena's cantina. Follow your nose. Tell the owner, Claude Nichols, I sent you.

My name's Will, Will Leland." Will glanced down at his guest's signature and added, "Staying long, Mr. Fargo?"

"Nope. We leave at dawn. I'll settle up with you after they make up their minds on how many rooms. I won't be staying in the hotel, so don't save a room for me. You do have a tub for the ladies to use?"

"No, sir, we don't. Lily Gómez has the only bath place in town for women. She's on the other side of the cantina. Tell Lily I sent you. Men use the tubs behind the barber shop. It's across the street and down on your right. If you get to the stable, you've gone too far. Tell Clemson I sent you."

Fargo nodded.

Back on the porch, he frowned at Sister Andrée and said, "Get off those horses before you draw a crowd." He went on to tell her about Lily Gómez' place. After he mentioned a crowd and the near proximity of tubs, Sister Andrée slipped to the ground and began snapping her fingers. The other two dismounted and along with Sister Andrée removed their bedrolls and other gear.

As Sister Andrée came onto the porch, Fargo stopped her to say, "The rooms are paid for. After I stable the horses, I'll come look in on you."

She brushed past him and went inside. Sisters Camille and Monique looked into his lake-blue eyes and smiled winsomely as they came up the steps. He heard the fingers snapping behind him. The two women glanced down and hurried inside.

Fargo led the four horses to the stable. Claude Nichols stood in the spacious portal. Stepping to one side, he clucked, "Mighty fine-looking pinto you have there, mister." When Fargo nodded, he asked hopefully, "Wouldn't want to sell him, would you?"

"Not for sale or trade," Fargo answered stiffly.

Claude ran a palm over the bay Arabian's rump. "Damn beautiful Arabians, mister. We never see these kind of horses 'round here."

Fargo nodded.

"Stalls are down here," Claude sighed, and showed the way.

While Fargo unsaddled the Qvaro, he watched the

stable-owner eye the nuns' sidesaddles and tack. "Have you ever before seen the like of them?" Fargo inquired.

"Yes, sir, once. A long time ago, back when I was a young stable boy in Massachusetts. They're French-made. Finest leather money can buy. First-class craftsmanship too. Your ladies must be high society. Cared for, these saddles will last a lifetime."

Fargo set his saddle and saddlebags on a top rail, then started inspecting the pinto's hooves for condition and the shoes for security. "I see you're a farrier too," he commented. "How about checking those Arabians' hooves and shoes for me. I'll pay for the service. Also, if you have the time and inclination, I'll pay you to dress down the saddles and tack."

"Sure. Be glad to." Nichols started removing saddles. Placing the first one on the top slat of a stall, he asked, "You and your ladies staying at the Texas Rose?"

"Yeah. Will said to tell you he sent me. They're staying with him. I'm not. I have drinking and card-playing to catch up on."

Claude chuckled, "Elena Suárez' place?"

"Thought I might. What brought on the belly rumble?"

"Elena. She favors big Anglos like you. But you want to watch her, mister. Elena's a hellcat."

"Good to know. I'll be careful. We leave at first light, Claude. Want me to settle up with you now or then?"

"Make it then. If you paid me now, I'd piss it off in a game of draw at the cantina."

"Suit yourself," Fargo replied. He picked up his Sharps and headed for the entrance. He paused in the opening and asked, "Do you by any chance know Lucas McCurdy?"

"Yep. He and his drovers came through here about three weeks ago. You a friend of Lucas'?"

"No. Never met the man. We stopped at his ranch a few nights ago. When he comes back, tell him his place was burned to the ground and that Comanche took his wife and daughter captive."

"Goddamn," Claude squalled. "Red Thurman?"

"Red's alive. Tell Lucas I'm looking for his women. When and if I find them, I'll bring them back to him."

"I'll tell him. What's your name, anyhow, mister?"

"Fargo. Skye Fargo. Some call me the Trailsman."

"Damn! I've heard of you. Lucas couldn't get any luckier, what with you going after those crazy Comanche. Damn right, I'll tell him."

Fargo headed for the hotel. On the way, he passed the cantina. He noticed a pretty-faced Mexican woman standing inside, looking through one of the dirty windowpanes. He wondered if she might be Elena Suárez. Coming onto the hotel's wide porch, he glanced over his shoulder at the cantina. She had stepped outside. Her figure matched her facial quality. For an instant their eyes met. Claude's right, Fargo decided: she is a hellion. He stepped into the hotel lobby.

Will smiled hugely, "Nichols fix you up okay?"

Fargo nodded. "Where'd you put Sister Andrée?"

"Number Eight. Top of the stairs and on the left. Last room down the hall."

"Fine. Now, where will I find the best steaks in town?"

"Only one place, Mr. Fargo. Elena's cantina. Her cook, Alberto Fuentes, makes the best. Tell Alberto I sent you."

"I will. Is her place decent enough for nuns?"

"Mister, I'd be lying if I said it was decent. Hardly a night goes by without a brawl or two occurring in there. And more than one man has drawn his last breath at Elena's. But those nuns being with a big man like you . . ."

"I'll chance it," Fargo muttered. "Hell, we have to eat."

He went upstairs and rapped on door number eight.

Sister Andrée's tight voice asked, *"Oui?"*

"It's me, Fargo. Open up."

He heard the bed squeak, several pair of feet scurrying about, voices speaking in hushed tones. After a long moment, the door cracked a few inches. Sister Andrée peered out at him. "*Oui*?" she repeated.

He saw she didn't have on her wimple. Long silver-white hair streamed over her shoulders, down over her bosom. "Er, I came to take you to dinner. Are all of you in there?"

"*Oui*. We were resting. Wait for us downstairs, *monsieur*." She shut the door.

Fargo stood there a moment longer, blinking with a puzzled expression on his chiseled face, before going down to the lobby. Something isn't right, he told himself.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Fargo?" Will asked, his smile gone.

Fargo shook his head, eased down into a straight-back to wait. Evening's shadows marched across the street before he heard the women coming down the stairs.

Approaching him, Sister Andrée said, "We go, *monsieur*."

He rose, nodded, and led the way to the cantina.

Sister Andrée balked outside the swinging doors. Glancing from the gloomy interior to him, she implored, "*Monsieur*, surely you do not expect us to go in here?"

"It's the only place," he told her. "You'll be all right." He held the doors open.

She stepped inside and halted. He had to nudge her out of the way so the other two could get in, then he had to shove all three away from the doors so he could come inside. The rectangular room was indeed gloomy, forbidding. It took a few seconds for his vision to adjust.

Three mirrors hung on the wall behind the bar. Five poker tables were scattered haphazardly around the room. Other than the dim sunlight that came through the grimy windows and doorway, the only other light source flickered from a pair of candles on the long shelf below the mirrors.

A fat man stood behind the bar, talking to three male customers. All three wore gun belts. Two men, both young and dressed as cowhands, occupied the table farthest on Fargo's right. They were drinking and trying to play cards in the dim light. A pair of young but overweight whores clung to both men. A third whore, older but not as meaty as the other two, sat alone at the table in front of the nuns. Fargo didn't see the pretty woman.

He stepped around Sister Camille and ushered the three nuns to the table in the far corner on his left. He seated them with their backs more or less to the room and his to the corner so he could see everything. He stood the Sharps in the corner, a short reach away.

The fat barkeep came and set one of the tapers in the

middle of the table. His expression indicated this might be the first time a nun had set foot in the cantina, and he wasn't quite sure how to act or what to say. Fargo jolted him out of the stupor, asking, "Will Leland at the hotel told me to ask for Alberto Fuentes. Is he here?"

"*Sí, señor.* I will get him." The chubby fellow turned and opened a door Fargo hadn't noticed in the back wall. Before it closed behind him, Fargo saw the door led onto a small patio. Rooms, probably used by the whores, surrounded the patio.

Sister Andrée leaned toward Fargo and said acidly, "*Monsieur*, we will get poisoned if we eat here."

As she spoke, a large black cockroach streaked across the table. Fargo cleared his throat, but said nothing. The grating sound of the back door opening drew their attention and closed the matter temporarily. A buxom Mexican female, not Pretty Face, stepped inside. A grinning cowhand with hat in hand followed close behind her. He looked both tuckered and satisfied.

Sister Andrée's ice-blue eyes gave her and the young cowpuncher the once-over, then they leveled on Fargo. "*Monsieur,*" she hissed, "how dare you insist on keeping us here. This place is a, a, er—"

"The word is whorehouse, ma'am," he broke in. "Has nothing to do with the quality of the food."

She leaned back, folded her arms over her bosom, and stared icily at him.

Again the door opened. Pretty Face entered, glanced at Fargo, and went behind the bar. She had a shapely ass, broad shoulders, and full breasts that sagged very little.

A short, lean man with a smile that matched Will Leland's came in behind her, wiping his hands on his apron. The man said, "*Buenas tardes, señor, hermanas.* Emilio said you wanted to see me. I am Alberto, *a su servicio.*"

"We need meals, Alberto," Fargo began. "Will Leland over at the hotel says you fix the best steaks in San Antonio."

"*Sí, señor*, that is true," Alberto beamed. "Is that what you want? And how hungry you are."

"Starving, *amigo*. Make it the largest steaks you have."

"*Sí*." Albert nodded, smiled at the nuns, and left.

Fargo told the fat man to bring a bottle of bourbon. Sisters Camille's and Monique's eyes flicked up when he said bourbon. He took it as a sign they imbibed upon occasion and that this was such one. "And bring four shot glasses with you," he quickly added.

Sister Monique began a smile that was negated by snapping fingers.

After setting the bottle and shot glasses on the table, the bartender started lighting the lamps. Fargo filled the glasses and held his out to make a toast. Sister Camille had to nudge Sister Andrée to join them. She sighed heavily before lifting her drink to touch the other three.

Fargo said, "Here's to three beautiful *mademoiselles* trapped in a, a, er—"

"Bordello," Sister Camille said.

"Bordello," Fargo echoed, and tossed down his drink.

All except Sister Andrée snickered. All except Sister Andrée licked their lips and extended their empties for refilling. Sister Andrée sipped from her glass and admitted, "*Monsieur*, I have to say the bourbon tastes good. It isn't often that we partake of liquor, so I ask you not to pour more down us. A small amount goes a long way."

He watched her tip the shot glass and finish off the content with one swallow. Smacking her lips, she placed the empty next to the bottle. Fargo refilled it.

Pretty Face moseyed over and struck a provocative hand-on-hip weight-on-one-foot stance. Her large dark eyes swept over the nuns' faces and settled on Fargo's. "I am María Elena Suárez," she finally said. "Emilio said you are staying at the Texas Rose. Will you be in San Antonio long?"

"No," Fargo answered. "We leave at sunrise. But I'll be back later this evening, after visiting Clemson's for a hot bath."

He watched Elena's eyebrows arch. Breaking the pose, she suggested, "Why pay Earl Clemson a nickel to bathe when my big tub is free? Earl doesn't scrub his customer's big backs, or give them all the bourbon they want, or . . ." She left it hanging for him to fill in.

Fargo said, "Might take you up on that generous offer, ma'am. I warn you, though, I'm filthy with trail dust. Might leave a nasty ring around the tub."

She smiled. "That's what tubs are for, big man. *Hasta luego*." She turned and moved to stand with the cowhands.

Clearly miffed, Sister Andrée admonished him. "Fargo, you are immoral. She will get you in trouble."

"Ma'am, trouble is my middle name. I think I can handle her. Besides, by hanging around here till morning I'll save a whole dollar room fee." He bounced his eyebrows a couple of times.

Sister Andrée glowered at him, opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, the back door swung in and Alberto backed through the doorway. His arms were laden with platters of steaming food. Removing them expertly, he set a platter before each person, then withdrew the flatware from his hip pockets and cloth napkins from his waistband.

Sister Andrée studied her knife and fork as though they were vermin-laden. Fargo and Alberto watched with keen interest as she cleaned each piece of the utensils with her napkin.

Alberto muttered, "So that's how it's done." He shook his head.

Fargo jerked his platter up when the cockroach reappeared. Alberto swatted it off the table, shrugged, and left them to eat. Fargo carved off a morsel of the steak that overlapped the plate. Poking it into his mouth, he chewed slowly, savoring the tasty juices.

Sister Monique, he noticed, was doing the same. Her eyes were closed and she made little childlike mews of joy. Her eyes opened partway and locked on his when she licked the juice from her lips. She's telling me something with those eyes and tongue, he thought. He shook his head to clear it of the forming thought.

Sister Andrée finished eating first and poured herself another drink. After sipping from it, she looked at Fargo and said, "*Monsieur*, I was wrong. My meal was excellent. Alberto is to be complimented." He watched her swill her shot glass dry.

Sister Camille spoke to her in French.

Sister Andrée blushed and stammered, "Camille, uh, she, she, asked, uh, where to find the—"

"Toilet?" Fargo inquired. He motioned for Elena.

"*Sí*, what do you need, *señor*? Was the food okay?" She scanned the empty platters.

"Meals were fine, Elena. One of the sisters needs to visit your privy."

"Sure. Florence will show her." She yelled, "Hey, Florence, c'mere a minute. One of the nuns needs to use your bucket." Turning back to Fargo, she asked, "Anything else, big man?"

He shook his head and gestured for Sister Camille to go with Florence. Elena drifted back to the cowhands. After she was out of hearing, Sister Andrée leaned toward Fargo and whispered, "Did I hear correct? She did say, bucket?"

"Yes, ma'am. Something wrong about using a bucket?"

Sister Andrée didn't answer. She stiffened and watched Camille leave with the whore.

Camille came back pursing her lips and bouncing her eyebrows. It occurred to Fargo that was her first experience with a bucket.

He said, "Well, ladies, it's bathtime. I'll walk you next door to Lily Gómez'. She'll take care of you." He pushed back from the table, stood, and headed for the swinging doors, Sharps in hand. Halfway to the doors, he heard one of the sisters gasp loudly. Spinning around, he saw one of the young cowpunchers fondling Sister Monique's rump. She looked terrified.

Fargo handed Sister Andrée his Sharps and stepped around her. Pulling the man off Monique, he drove a fist into his stomach. The tipsy youngster doubled over gasping for air. Fargo straightened him with an uppercut to the jaw. Then all hell broke loose. The cowboy's companions dived onto Fargo and started pounding him. Fargo twisted violently, threw one off, and hit the other up beside the head. The man staggered backward and crashed into the bar.

The one he'd thrown off grabbed a chair and swung it at Fargo. He ducked and came up with his arms around the man's waist. The fellow screamed, "Let me go, you big bastard! You're breaking my back."

Fargo slung him against the bar. The youngster groaned as he slumped unconscious to the grimy floor. The Trailsman grabbed a fistful of shirt on the man who'd fondled Camille. Holding him out at arm's length, Fargo snarled, "Fellow, you made a stupid mistake when you touched her." He slammed his other fist into the lad's nose. Bone crunched, blood spewed. Fargo let go of the shirt. The man collapsed to the floor, unconscious before he met it. Fargo looked at the third cowboy. He back-pedaled a short distance, then knocked over two chairs as he ran outside.

Elena and her whores started applauding. The dumbstruck nuns simply stared at him. Sister Andrée handed him the rifle.

Fargo said, "Come along, *mademoiselles*, it's bathtime." He pushed through the swinging doors.

Lily Gómez was a short, chubby woman and as jolly as God ever created one. "Ah," she chortled, "*el buen Dios* honors me with three charming sisters. Welcome, welcome, Sisters. You are new to San Antonio, *sí*?"

"*Sí*," Sister Andrée replied, and Fargo detected a hint of nervousness in the one word.

"Just passing through, Lily," he said, "on our way north." Then he explained, "They're from France, so you needn't try to make conversation with them. See that they get hot baths, then leave them be. I'm paying." He shot Sister Andrée a wink.

"Ah, *señor*, I couldn't accept pay from women of the cloth." Lily picked up a stack of towels and washrags and nodded toward the back door.

Fargo said, "See you ladies in the morning. Yell real loud if you become frightened. I'll hear you and come running." He left a silver dollar on the counter and departed.

From the porch he saw the three cowpunchers he'd fought riding away. Two leaned on their horses' necks as though they might fall from their saddles any second. Hellofa penalty to pay, he mused to himself, for feeling a nice butt, but that's the way it goes sometimes. He grinned and headed for the cantina.

Elena's place was deserted except for her help. She

and Emilio were behind the bar, the four whores seated at the table between the swinging doors and bar.

Fargo ambled to the bar and ordered a full bottle of bourbon and a drinking glass. After pouring a drink, he turned and leaned the small of his back against the bar. One of the whores in front of him put her foot on her chair seat and slowly parted her knees. The hem of her dress came up, rode over her knees, and fell to her thighs, revealing a thick patch of black in the shadows of her crotch.

Elena snapped, "Margarita, put that foot on the floor. He's mine."

Reluctantly, Margarita obeyed, smirked at the loss.

Fargo said, "Seeing that I ran off all the customers, the drinks are on me. Belly up to the bar, *señoritas*, and let me feel some of that the Anglos missed."

Chairs squealed as they pushed back. They came smiling and jiggling their bosoms. Two hands rubbed his crotch.

Margarita rolled her eyes and purred, "Nice. *Demasiado grande*, Elena. You may need my help."

When Elena laughed, so did the others. Nalgona's nimble fingers opened his fly and felt inside. He watched her lips pucker and her eyes widen. She said, "*Sí*, Elena, it is big, and heavy."

Fargo took her hand away and turned to face Elena and Emilio. "They lie," he told her, and he took a long swig from the glass.

Elena shook her head slowly. Through an easy grin she whispered, "No, big man, they do not lie. Not to Elena. But we will see, won't we, big man?"

Fargo lowered a hand to Nalgona's ample fanny and stroked it a few times before squeezing. She giggled. "*Señor*, don't start something you're not ready to finish. I bite."

Elena flicked her head, ordering them away from her man.

Fargo refilled his glass, watching the tip of Elena's tongue circle her lips. He reached across the bartop and slipped off the left shoulder strap of her dress, then the right. A slight wriggle by her, and the bodice dropped

below her breasts. They were lovely, pillowy and smooth. Large brown circles gave emphasis to the pencil-width nipples that protruded erect, begging for him to taste.

Fargo picked up his bottle and nodded toward the back door. Elena stepped out of the yellow dress while leading him across the patio to her quarters. He scooped up the dress and, after entering her bedroom, tossed it on a chair. She disappeared through a side door, reached a hand back through it, and wriggled a finger for him to come on.

He leaned the rifle against the wall next to the door and stepped into her bath area and toilet. It was dominated by a huge porcelain tub that stood on lions' feet. A bucket filled with fresh water stood waiting on the floor at one wall. Elena was bent over the rim of the tub, fussing to get the drain stopper in place.

He came up behind her and pressed against her parted crack, setting the liquor bottle among boxes of body powder and vials of perfume on the tabletop behind the tub. She squirmed to work his bulge into her crack, then raised and curled a hand on his nape. He cupped her face with one hand and turned it to him. She looked up into his eyes, then tilted her head and parted her lips, silently encouraging him to favor her with a kiss.

Kissing her, Fargo cradled Elena in his strong arms and carried her to the bed. She pulled him down on her, smothered him with wet kisses, and nibbled his ears, throat, and chiseled face. So skillful was the fleshy package of unbridled femininity that she'd taken off his shirt without him realizing it. Her palms caressed his muscled back, and she whimpered, raked his sides with her fingernails, and murmured, "Take me, big man. Take me now." He felt her hot quick breaths on his chest. She was squirming now, her fingers searching for his fly, her legs parting, closing, and her knees coming up to clamp him to her.

He raised onto his knees and removed his gun belt, lowered it to the floor. She released his belt buckle, pulled the Levi's open, grasped his hardening member. "Nice, big man," she cooed. "May I wet it? Taste you?"

He rolled off her and stood on the floor to pull off his

boots, pants, and underdrawers. Elena didn't wait for him to return to the bed. She flopped onto her stomach, wrapped her arms around his hips, and pulled. He watched her take in about half his length, felt her hot tongue circle once, then go to work on the soft underside. Gulping, she took in the rest of him, and began sucking slowly, backing off, returning to gorge on it again and again.

Fargo let her continue until he felt himself start jerking, then he pulled back and withdrew. She rolled onto her back, breathing hard, and licked her smiling lips. *"Señor,"* she gasped, "I'm on fire, ready to feel you inside me."

She parted her legs wide for him to kneel between them. Instead, he knelt beside her and fed into his mouth her left nipple, areola, and as much of the soft breast as he could get his lips around. When he sucked, she cried joyously, "Harder, big man, suck harder. Do the other one too. Oh, Jesus, that feels good."

He moved to the right breast, had his fill of it, then went back to the left. Elena moaned deliriously and writhed constantly, dragging her fingernails up and down his back, biting his shoulders and neck.

Satisfied that he had indeed got her good and hot and ready, he knelt between her knees and leaned forward. Her hands clasped his maleness and guided it to the slippery opening. As the blood-swollen head parted the lips, she dug her left heel into his left buttock cheek and raised her hips. He penetrated into the hot sheath by half his length and paused.

Elena whimpered, "No. Give me all of it. Please?" Her right knee came up and started raking his left side.

Fargo thrust. Elena went wild; bucking, gyrating her hips, arching her back, doing anything and everything to give her even greater pleasure with the hardness pumping piston-like within her deepest recesses. Both heels dug hard into his buttocks, then they moved up and locked on the small of his back and then went up and hooked on his shoulders, raising her hips as high as possible. She started pumping furiously, gasped, "Oh, oh . . . yes, yes . . . that's it. Faster, big man . . . faster . . . and harder. Go all the way."

Fargo began swaying his hips, thrusting high in the slick opening. She screamed her ecstasy, lowered her legs, bent her knees, and planted her feet on the mattress. She levered her hips up and forced him in to the hilt. He felt her shudder when her first spasm seized around his throbbing shaft and started milking. When he erupted, she gasped, "Oh, oh, oh . . . yes, yes . . . oh! Don't take it out. Let me have it all . . . keep going, big man. That's it. Don't stop. Harder . . . deeper . . . aaayyeeiii! I'm in heaven."

He pushed up and looked at the hellcat. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open, sucking in fresh air. She mewed, "Jesus, that was so good. Say you will stay the night with me. I want . . . No! I need more of you, much more."

He bent and rolled each nipple between his teeth, kissed each breast. She moaned something that sounded to him like, "I adore you."

Breaking the hot kiss, he lay beside her and together they caught their breath. Both were lathered with perspiration. Finally he said, "Elena, I need a pull from that bottle I left on your perfume table."

"Maybe in a minute," she whispered. "If I leave the bed, you might run. I'm not through with you."

"I'll be here." He chuckled. "Go bring me the bourbon and clean up."

"Promise you won't leave?"

"I promise."

He watched her slip from the bed and go into the other room. Seconds later he heard water splashing. She reappeared with a towel clamped between her thighs and the bottle of bourbon in hand. She handed him the bottle, then began cleaning his groin.

As Fargo drank from the bottle, he heard the nuns yell his name.

Swiftly he pushed Elena aside. "Check outside for me," he told her. By the time she made it to the door, he had his shirt and underdrawers on. "Well?" he growled impatiently.

He pulled on his britches, heard her gasp, then whisper, "There's a man standing in the back door to the cantina. He has a gun in his hand."

Pulling on his boots, he asked, "Wearing a duster?"

"Yes. Hurry! He's coming this way."

The nuns continuous screams came from the second floor of the hotel.

"Move away from the door," Fargo ordered. "Go hide in the tub." He swung his gun belt around his hips, buckled it, and drew his Colt.

Elena darted past him. He opened the door slightly and peered out. The duster-clad desperado was standing in the middle of the patio, turning slowly with his gun hand extended. Fargo waited until the fellow looked straight at Elena's door, then flung the door open and fired. The bullet's impact hurtled him backward. During the awkward fall, the man's six-gun fired three times, the slugs chewing into the patio tiles.

Fargo dashed to the wall beside the back door. Replacing the spent cartridge, he yelled to those inside the cantina, "Take cover, hell's coming in!" He heard feet scuffle and a table crash on the floor.

Sister Andrée's scream penetrated the hotel wall. "Put me down, you bastard. Put me down."

Fargo fired two shots into the wall above the window of the nun's room, then quickly reloaded.

A hard voice shouted inside the cantina, "Come and get us, you big son of a bitch."

Fargo shoved the door full open. Two slugs whizzed through the opening and thudded into the adobe wall across the patio. Fargo crouched and dived inside. Two more bullets buzzed out above him. One gunman used Margarita as a shield. Another stood at the windows to the left of the swinging doors. Both their shots missed as he scooted behind the bar. He hadn't spotted the third gunman, but he did see his reflection in the big mirror when the gaunt-faced man rose from in front of the bar. Fargo watched and waited until the man moved directly across from him, then he poked the Colt over the bar and squeezed the trigger. He heard the man stumble backward and knock over a table. The swinging doors squeaked twice. Margarita screamed curses . . . she was outside.

Crouched, Fargo ran to the end of the bar and peered

around the corner. The room was deserted. Still crouched, he stepped out into the open. The gunmen had left. Nalgona peeked around the edge of an overturned table. He motioned her to stay down, then ran to the front entrance.

Four mounted gunmen, spread out on the street in front of the hotel, faced the cantina. Two saddled and ground-reined horses stood in front of the hotel. Fargo backed up, ran, and dived through a window. In a shower of glass, he tumbled off the porch and came up firing. Two gunmen fell to the dirt. The other two danced their mounts about, as though they couldn't decide whether to flee or to take on the big man. Finally, one swung his gun hand around to shoot. Fargo shot first. The man screamed as he toppled over the rump of his horse. His companion broke right and charged down the street, away from Fargo. Fargo moved out into the middle of the street and took dead-aim on the fleeing man.

Just then the two Moroccans came through the hotel's front door. Fargo swung to face them. Each carried a nun draped over his shoulder. With their free hands they dragged Sister Andrée by the hair of her head. After seeing Fargo's big Colt pointed at them, they retreated back inside.

Fargo ran after them. Coming into the lobby, he stumbled over Will Leland, who was on his hands and knees, groaning. Fargo scrambled to his feet and dashed up the stairs. As he came into the hallway, he saw Sister Andrée being pulled inside a room. The door slammed shut, and he heard the lock snap. He backed against the wall across from the locked door, ran, and drove his right shoulder against the door. It splintered enough that he easily knocked a hole in it with his fists. Opening it from the inside, he darted in. The room was dark and silent.

Suddenly, he was knocked to the floor. Hands grabbed him by the throat and choked. Fists hammered his stomach. He broke the stranglehold and rolled onto his back as fists continued to pound him. He kicked, catching one of the assailants in the thigh. The man grunted, stumbled into the bed. Fargo ignored the fists slamming against his head and drew his stiletto instead of the Colt. He was afraid he might accidentally shoot one of the women.

He slashed blindly, cut nothing but air. A hand gripped his wrist and twisted. The stiletto clattered on the wooden floor. As he fumbled to find it, he heard the attackers going out the window.

Crawling to the window, he bumped into one of the nuns sprawled on the floor. He staggered to the window and looked out. The Moroccans were on the cantina's patio, sprinting to the back door. Fargo shook his head to clear it, then headed downstairs to intercept them.

They were riding fast and hard in the same direction the desperado went, their burnooses billowing behind them. Fargo drew his Colt and fired twice at the fleeing men. Neither screamed or fell. Disgusted, the Trailsman reloaded, holstered his weapon, and went back inside the hotel.

Will Leland was steadying himself against a wall. He looked at Fargo sheepishly and attempted an apology. Fargo stopped him, saying, "Will, you must have done something right. You bought me enough time to get here before those bastards finished their work. You okay? Need a doctor?"

"Thanks, Mr. Fargo, but I think I'll make it. Just dizzy. They hit me when I wasn't looking. Never saw men wearing women's clothes before. Guess I was too shocked to take care of myself. I'm okay. Darlene isn't going to believe me, though."

Back in Room Eight, Fargo lit the lamp. All three of the women were on hands and knees, trying to rise. He helped Sisters Camille and Monique to the bed, then sat Sister Andrée in a chair.

"Other than being scared half to death, are you ladies all right?" he asked.

Sister Andrée felt her jaw. "Achmid struck me. He hit Camille too. Mahmud knocked Monique unconscious. We had just returned from bathing. The door flew open and there they were. We fought them, but they were too fast and tough for us."

He glanced around the room. The bureau drawers were on the floor, as were the bed linens. After rendering the women unconscious, the Arabs had ransacked the room. Fargo asked, "What in blazes is it that Achmid wants?"

Sister Andrée stood shakily. "*Monsieur*, we are afraid to stay here the rest of the night. Please take us to other accommodations."

Peeved, he said, "Ma'am, you didn't answer my question."

"I cannot," she said in a near whisper.

Shaking his head, Fargo turned for the shattered door, saying, "Okay, Sister, I'll let it go for now. Get the other two women and follow me."

On their way out he handed Leland five silver dollars. He took the nuns to the cantina. Elena listened to his problem, then had three of her whores take the nuns to their rooms. Sister Andrée started to protest, but Fargo stopped her with an upraised hand. "Sister, get your ass out of here and in the bed. They'd never think to look for you in a whorehouse."

"Bordello," Camille muttered as she followed Florence out the back door.

After they left, Elena filled two glasses with bourbon. She sipped hers while looking into his eyes and smiling. Fargo guzzled his down. Nodding toward the back door, he said, "Come on, honey, we have unfinished business."

Neither slept a wink that night. If they weren't drinking, they were bathing, and if they weren't in the tub, they were wrestling on the bed. At dawn Fargo was bleary-eyed and thoroughly exhausted. Elena was wide awake but limp as a dishrag. They looked at each other with silly grins on their faces.

From beyond the door, Sister Andrée said, "We go, *monsieur*."

6

Fargo eased into a sitting position and stared blankly at his feet. Elena raised a hand to his back and rubbed weakly. Outside, Sister Andrée cleared her throat loudly. Elena mumbled, "Tell her to go away."

Fargo swung his feet to the floor. He stared out the one small window. Dawn was trying to break through low-hanging clouds.

"We go, *monsieur*," Sister Andrée repeated.

Fargo's eyes drifted to the door. He was tired of hearing the caustic woman tell him that. Just once, he thought, it would be nice to hear her ask, "*Shall* we go, *monsieur*?" Standing, he muttered, "I heard you the first time." Stretching, he spoke in a louder voice. "Go get the others. I'll meet you in the cantina in a few minutes." He started collecting his clothes.

Elena left the bed. On the way to the toilet she stopped and kissed him on the shoulder. "You need strength, big man. Alberto isn't up yet. I'll fix breakfast."

By the time she came back, he had dressed and was sitting on the edge of the bed. Watching her slip on a dress, he said, "Elena, you're a hell of a fine saloon keeper."

"I know," she replied, then changed the subject. "Are you screwing those nuns? One's with child."

"No. I haven't touched them." He rose and opened the door.

All three sisters were on the patio, hands clasped in front of them, staring curiously at him. "Don't hurry me," he muttered. "We eat, then we go." He nudged

Sister Andrée out of his path with the Sharp's long barrel and headed for the cantina.

While he searched behind the bar for a bottle of bourbon, they entered and sat at the table nearest the front windows. He studied them as he took a long pull from the bottle, then went and joined them. "Sleep well?" he asked.

Sister Andrée looked at him and started to speak. When he smiled, she looked out the window. After a long moment, she said, "*Monsieur*, you are a cruel man."

He got up and moved to another table.

A few minutes later, Elena came in with the food. She served the women first, then sat to eat with Fargo. They said nothing until after he'd cleaned his plate of scrambled eggs liberally seasoned with chiles. She glanced at the nuns while whispering to him, "Do you know they speak Spanish?" When his eyes kicked up, she added, "Nalgona told me."

"English too?"

"Only the bitchy one."

"That's good to know. Thanks."

"Where will you go when you leave here?"

He swallowed the last of a tortilla. "North. What's between here and Waco?"

"Ranches and a place where the stage stops to change teams. It's about halfway to Waco. You will be there by dark." She showed him a forced smile that might have said, "You look weak as a kitten to me," then teased, "If you can stay in the saddle."

Fargo chuckled. "You don't look too damn energetic yourself, woman. I'll be halfway there before you can stagger back to bed."

"I'm sore," she admitted.

"Me too," he agreed.

"We go, *monsieur*," Sister Andrée's tart voice said, a hint of impatience in the tone.

Fargo pushed back from the table, answering, "Yeah, *mademoiselles*, we go now."

Elena walked outside with him. She raised on bare tiptoes and embraced him. They kissed, forcefully. As she curled an arm around his neck, he cupped her but-

tock cheeks in his hands and held her close. One of the nuns moaned. He opened one eye and saw Monique gulping. Sister Andrée spun her back to him, walked away snapping her fingers. He lingered entwined with Elena a moment longer before breaking the kiss. He shot her a wink, then turned and ambled away, headed for the stable. He heard Elena say, "*Hasta luego*, big man. *Gracias*, for lying with me." Without looking back he waved to her.

Claude Nichols was waiting in the stable for them. As the women walked past him, he nodded, then turned and stopped Fargo to warn him, "Bill Keller woke me up 'bout an hour ago. He'd been in the saddle all night. Came down from Waco. Bill said shortly before sundown yesterday he saw a large party of Indians riding north. Comanche. Maybe the same ones you saw at Lucas' place. You want to keep your eyes open. They're known to turn back sometimes."

Fargo nodded. "I'll watch for them. Did Bill by any chance mention seeing the two McCurdy women with them?"

"First thing I asked him. Said they was too far away to tell. Bill said all he had on his mind was getting the hell out of there."

"Can't say I blame him. I'll keep an ear to the ground. Elena Suárez told me there's a stage way station north of here."

"That's right. A hard day's ride."

"I want to follow the stage route. How do I pick it up?"

Claude gave him the directions out of town. "Can't miss it," he concluded.

"One final question. Does the stage have a history of being held up between here and the way station?"

"It's happened a couple of times, but not recently. That's not so between the station and Waco, though. And it's more likely to happen the closer you get to Waco."

"Lazy robbers?"

"You got that right. They lie in wait, hold it up, then hightail it back to Waco to spend the passengers' money.

Most hang out in Joe Gilly's saloon. It gets worse between Waco and Fort Worth. Then the stage gets visited by robbers from both ends of the line."

"That's good to know. How much do I owe you?"

"Four dollars ought to do it. There wasn't anything wrong with the Arabians' hooves or shoes."

Fargo handed him six silver dollars, saying dressing down the saddles and tack was well worth every penny of the extra two.

Making the Ovaro ready for the trail, Fargo asked Sister Andrée if they by any chance had guns they hadn't shown him. She insisted they did not. "Well," he said, "if I gave you pistols would you know how to aim and fire them?"

"No, *monsieur*."

"Would you try?"

"*Pas du tout*. It is your job to protect us."

He dropped the Sharps into its saddle case, leveled his eyes on hers, and said, "Well, ma'am, what happens if I get killed?"

Nonplussed she answered, "*Monsieur*, we would be at the murderer's mercy." Holding the eye contact, she grinned easily and added rather smugly, "But, *monsieur*, you will not be killed."

How do I take that? he thought. His eyebrows arched. "Oh? Are you saying you ladies have been praying on my behalf and were told—"

"No, *monsieur*," she interrupted. "Nobody has to intercede for you." He waited for her to explain. She got in the saddle and said, "We go?"

Shaking his head, he mounted up and led the way out of Nichols' stable.

Ten minutes later they were on the trail leading to the way station. He watched a roadrunner, then a red fox streak across the wagon ruts in front of him. Both disappeared into a pile of brush. Immediately he heard them battling within the dense thicket. A couple of feathers floated up, then all was quiet.

Fargo glanced up at the sky. Dark clouds raced north. He didn't like the looks of them. Turning in the saddle, he checked on the women riding single-file. Sisters Camille

and Andrée were watching the graying sky. Monique was looking straight at him. She smiled and winked. He didn't like the looks of that, either.

By high noon, the clouds had built up on the northern horizon. They had also changed appearance, from moisture-laden dull-gray to ugly black. The air was deathly still, but he saw no flashes of lightning or heard no rumbles of thunder.

Far off on their left stood a house atop a hill. It looked terribly lonely, vulnerable. Fargo reckoned Texans were a hardy lot, determined people. If only there were forests and streams, he mused, this land would be more hospitable. Fargo yearned to be back among the mountains, the majestic valleys and canyons, the high-country meadows and swift-running streams he loved and knew so well.

Lost in thoughts of different places, he failed to notice the road led into several acres infested with rocks, mesquite, and rattlers, or that they were about midway through it. A small rattlesnake slithered across the meandering road in front of him.

Sister Andrée clearing her throat broke into his reveries. He looked over his shoulder at her. "*Monsieur*, we need to stop and dismount." He saw three tight smiles and expressions that conveyed a sense of great urgency.

He halted amid mesquite and eased to the ground. "I'll watch that house, Sister," he told her, "while you ladies take a hike behind me." As he turned, they hurried into the mesquite.

He was watering a clump of grass when the women commenced screaming. "Help! Help!" All of Sister Andrée's arrogance was missing in her plea. Smiling, he interrupted the golden stream, buttoned up, and went to see about the problem.

They had scattered. All three were hanging on to tree limbs. They had jumped, then swung their feet up and locked their ankles around the limbs. The awkward unladylike positions made their shapely fannies hang down near to the ground and the hems of their habits collect in their laps.

Sister Andrée had managed to pull her bloomers up before she leapt for her limb. Sister Camille hadn't been

as fast. Hers were down between her knees and ankles. Sister Monique's were on the ground, where she had run out of them. As though by divine providence, a hole appeared in the dark clouds and the bright shaft of sunlight that shot through it highlighted the trees most brilliantly. For an instant before the hole closed, Sisters Camille's and Monique's bare behinds shone like heavenly halos.

Fargo marveled at their erotic poses for a long pause, then extracted an armadillo from its entanglement in Sister Monique's bloomers. When he held the scaly creature out to them by its tail, all three butts rose swiftly. He carried the armadillo deeper into the trees and turned it loose.

Returning, he saw they'd left the trees and mounted up, Sister Monique minus her bloomers. As he passed by, he picked them up. When he held them out for her to take, Sister Monique made a face and shook her head vigorously. "No, *monsieur*."

He draped them on a mesquite limb, shot her a wink, then eased into his saddle.

A mile or so from the run-in with the armadillo the road rounded a hillock and went down a gradual slope that led to a wooded area through which a creek flowed. Fargo saw dust boiling on the far side of the oaks and elms. He halted to watch and listen.

Sister Andrée queried, "What is it, *monsieur*? Indians?"

He shook his head. "'No. A stagecoach." He spurred the pinto to gallop and went to intercept the stage at the stream.

They got to the creek just as the stage entered the woods. He dismounted and told the women to do likewise and to water their horses while he talked to the driver. When the stagecoach came into view, he waved for the driver to stop.

The old man pulled back on his reins, yelling, "Whoa, damn you, I said whoa!" The horses halted at the water's edge.

Stepping over the stream, Fargo said, "Howdy, mister. Name's Skye Fargo. The ladies and I are up from San Antonio, headed for Waco." He held his hand up for the weathered-faced man to shake.

Clasping the hand, the old man smiled and said, "Glad to meetcha. My name's Simms, Daniel Simms. This here's Link Johnson." He nodded toward the lanky younger man riding shotgun on the seat beside him. Link lifted an index finger from the barrel of his rifle, acknowledging Fargo.

Simms continued, "Where'd you get them nuns? San Antone?" He squinted at them, cocked his head, and muttered, "Are my eyes playing tricks on me again? I'd swear that one's a tad foot-broke." Before Fargo could reply, Simms leaned back and shouted over his shoulder to his passengers, "You folks can get out if you want to. We'll rest a spell while I palaver with this man." Glancing to Link, he said, "When those front two horses are finished, move the next two up so's they can get a drink."

Fargo watched Simms climb down to the ground. The coach door opened and three men got out, one a priest, the other two drummers. The drummers were dressed citified, complete with bowlers. Fargo exchanged nods with them, then faced Simms and asked, "What's it like ahead of me? Muddy?"

Simms grunted, squatted, scooped up a handful of water, and slurped it before answering, "Dunno about any mud, but the station is a mess."

"Oh?" Fargo muttered. "What do you mean by that?"

"Redskins. This morning at sunup a bunch of Comanche raided the place. Good thing Link and me and these men were there to help the Cobbs out, else them red bastards would've killed everybody and burned the station plumb to the ground. Hell of a fight it was. Lasted all of thirty minutes before they gave up and left. Set fire to the lodge to smoke us out, but some of us got the fire doused in time to save most of it. The priest there, him and one of Amos Cobb's boys fought 'em away from burning up the hay barn."

"You're positive they were Comanche?" Fargo asked.

The old man stood and squinted at him. "Hell, yes, I'm sure. Mister, I'd know a Comanche a mile away. See 'em all the time. They was Comanche all right."

"Don't get your dander up," Fargo said through a grin. "I just wanted to make sure. We had a surprise visit

by Comanche a few days ago at the McCurdy ranch down below San Antonio. I'm wondering if they might be the same ones. When they left, they took the two McCurdy women, mother and daughter, with them. Did you—"

"No, I didn't see any females," Simms cut in. "There was so much going on so fast. They could've been there, and I didn't notice." He turned to the passengers and asked if any had seen females with the Indians. All shook their heads.

Fargo had seen the priest watching the women and noticed that they were nervous because of it, especially Sister Andrée. She kept busy with her saddle, making it a point to keep the chestnut mare between her and the priest. Fargo could tell the priest was itching to go talk with the nuns, and perceived they didn't desire to have him any nearer to them than he already was.

He told the priest, "Father, you look as though you want to go talk to them. Go ahead. But I warn you, unless you speak French, you might not get much out of them."

The priest, a younger man, slim and bright-eyed, chuckled and waded the creek. Fargo watched him move to stand among the Arabians, then turned his attention back to the old man and the two drummers. They discussed the bad weather and the way station until the priest returned.

Offering his hand to Fargo, the priest said, "You were right. I didn't get anything out of them. By the way, my name is Father Hardaway. Yours is?"

"Skye Fargo."

"Mr. Fargo, could you and I have a little chat?" He scanned the men's faces, his expression making his apology, implying that what he had to say was for Fargo's ears only.

Simms mumbled something about needing to check the stage's wheels and axles. He turned and walked away. The drummers said they'd give him a hand. The priest suggested he and Fargo stroll upstream while talking.

When they were out of earshot, the priest said, "I'm on my way from Kansas City to Goliad, to replace the priest there. He died a few weeks ago. Anyhow, I see by the nuns' habits that they are from the St. Claire Order

of my Franciscan brethren and that one of them is pregnant. I'm curious to know why they are with you and where they're going. Would you enlighten me?"

"Sure. First, I don't know anything about Sister Andrée's condition, meaning who got her that way, or when or where it happened." He went on to explain what happened at the river and reviewed the events leading up to the present.

Father Hardaway listened with interest, nodding at all the right times. When Fargo fell silent, he said, "Frankly, Mr. Fargo, I can't imagine their destination being Fort Worth, Cowtown, as some call it. You see, there is no Catholic church there, not yet anyway, most certainly not Franciscan." He stopped walking and looked into Fargo's eyes before continuing. When he did, he changed the subject abruptly. "Nuns are still human beings, Mr. Fargo. While most remain faithful to their vows of chastity, some succumb, but they are rare."

"I don't consider their chastity or succumbing any of my business," Fargo told him flatly. He wondered why the man even brought up her condition or admitted other nuns spread their legs. What they did was their private business.

Nodding his agreement, Father Hardaway continued, "Nor is it any of mine."

"Then what's the point?" Fargo asked, his patience running thin.

"The point is," Father Hardaway began, "I don't believe they are nuns."

Fargo had already reached that conclusion but had to ask, "Oh? What makes you think that?"

They started walking back to the stagecoach. After a few paces the priest explained, "None has a rosary. The one with a mole near the corner of her lips wears a silver and diamond ring worth a small fortune. Have you seen them with their wimples removed?"

"Wimples?"

"Their head coverings. Have you ever seen their bare heads?"

Fargo thought back to the pond in the rocks where they'd bathed that first night, when the Moroccans at-

tacked. Not only had he seen their heads, he also saw their entire bodies, but it had been too dark, too shadowy to discern either clearly. All he remembered were their vague forms, enough to know they were naked. "No, not really," he finally answered. "Why? Are their heads important?"

"Yes. Nuns keep their hair cut very short, much like a young boy's. If their hair is longer than that, then they aren't nuns. Another thing, Mr. Fargo, another oddity that leads me to believe they aren't nuns: they speak French only. Mr. Fargo, they couldn't perform nuns' duties unless they spoke English too, especially in an American parish."

Fargo had also reached that conclusion, even though Sister Andrée did speak English fairly well, and he knew all three could converse in Spanish. He chose to keep that knowledge to himself. The hair length fascinated him. "That's good to know, Father. Eventually I suppose I'll see one of them with her wimple off, then I'll know for sure. Do Franciscan priests have long hair, say, as long as mine?"

"Oh, no. At best, only fuzz. Why do you ask? Did the priest who was killed have long hair?"

"Yes. A mop of it. Dark and curly."

"Then, Mr. Fargo, none is what they claim. You can be sure of it. The physical evidence against them is too strong to believe otherwise. You seem to be able to communicate with them. Shall we go confront them, see what they are up to?"

Again Fargo thought back, this time to the dying priest. Finally he said, "Father, it's really none of my business who or what they are. I promised Jeansonne I'd take them to Cowtown, and I honor my promises to the letter. Once I get them there, my mission is fulfilled. Come hell or high water, I intend to get them to Cowtown safely. However, I am a mite curious. You seem observant. You see in their charade as nuns things a non-Catholic such as myself would overlook, miss completely. Who and what do you think they are, why they would dress as nuns?"

Father Hardaway sighed. Shrugging, he admitted, "I have no idea. I confess I hoped you had an explanation . . . to satisfy my own curiosity, of course."

Fargo chuckled, for the women were rapidly shaping up to be true enigmas. And that riddle intrigued him. "Well, Father, maybe I'll learn all about them before I part with them. If I do, where do I write to satisfy your curiosity?"

"You know my name. Address the letter to me at the Catholic church in Goliad, Texas. I'll receive it. I'd be lying if I said I'm not already on pins and needles to hear from you."

Approaching the stage, Fargo posed a final question. "Does the name Al Cazara mean anything to you?"

"Al Cazara," the priest repeated. "No. I've never heard of him. Is he Spanish or Italian?"

"Beats me," Fargo hastened to answer. "All I know is he figures into this some way."

"Perhaps they are to meet him in Cowtown," Father Hardaway suggested.

"Could be," Fargo replied. "I'll know shortly." He shook hands with the priest, then went to Simms, who stood talking with the dandy-dressed drummers.

Simms said, "You want to be on the lookout for those savages, Fargo. They've been known to come back to places they already hit. You cain't always count on 'em moving north to the crossing."

"Crossing? What crossing?" Fargo asked.

"Why, Comanche Crossing," the old man offered, his tone laced with disbelief that Fargo didn't know about it. "It's north of Cowtown. That's where the bastards fan out after coming down into Texas. Ask about the crossing when you get to Cowtown. Those folks will tell you all about the place."

Fargo told him, "I will. Anything else?"

"Nope." Simms glanced up at Link, but spoke to all. "Reckon we've tarried here long enough, gents. Get back in this rattling pile of shit and I'll see if it'll roll through this creek one more time."

Fargo shook hands all around, then stepped back to watch. As the passengers got in the coach, Simms climbed up into his seat and took the reins from Link. The Trailsman said, "Take care, old-timer. If you see Elena Suárez, tell her I'm still sore as hell."

Simms looked at him, grinned, and nodded, then slapped the reins, yelling, "Gidup, you sorry sonsabitches!"

The stage creaked and groaned as it lurched forward. Link and Fargo exchanged good-byes with raised index fingers, Link's from the barrel of his Spencer .52, Fargo's from the brim of his hat.

Simms yelled at his team all the way up the grassy slope. Fargo shifted his gaze to the women. They stood by their mounts, waiting for him to give an order.

He moved upstream, just above where the wheels had carved ruts, to undisturbed water and squatted to dip cupped hands into it.

Sister Andrée said, "We go, *monsieur*."

He stared over his hands at her while drinking, then dragged the back of a hand across his mouth and said in Spanish so all would hear and understand, "Lady, I don't want to hear you say that again. Do and, so help me, I'll turn you over my knee."

She stiffened, swelled up with the mighty breath she took and held. Her ice-blue eyes flashed with much anger.

Fargo stepped over to the other bank. Scanning their expressions, he saw hints of worry in all three, and he knew they were wondering what he and Father Hardaway had talked about, especially in regard to them. Again he spoke in Spanish. "All right, from now on all of us can talk to one another. Camille, Monique, I know you speak Spanish. So do you, Andrée." He intentionally avoided mentioning anything he and the priest discussed. Instead, he focused on the way station. "This morning the Comanches attacked the place we are heading for. I don't know what we'll find when we get there. It isn't known if they turned back this way or not, so keep your eyes and ears open."

Camille and Monique broke sheepish smiles and nodded, but Andrée, grim-jawed as ever, inquired about Father Hardaway. She didn't mince words when she asked bluntly, "What did the priest want?"

Fargo decided to give all three of them something to think about. So they wouldn't miss it, he lowered his eyes slowly to Andrée's slightly bulging belly. "He wanted to know if that was my doing. He wanted to know if I slept with all of you."

Andrée snorted. Folding her arms over her bosom, she looked away and stared into the woods.

Monique and Camille exchanged glances.

He said, "I told him what we did was none of his business."

Andrée exhaled. She turned her eyes to meet his and mumbled, "Thank you, *monsieur*."

Nodding, he said, "Now we go, *mademoiselles*."

As they cleared the tree line, the women dropped back. Fargo glanced behind. They rode abreast with Andrée in the middle, almost touching, so he couldn't hear their voices. Not that it mattered, because they conversed in French. He nonetheless listened to them and now and then his wild-creature hearing picked up his name. They were talking about him. Later he heard Andrée mention Cowtown. Then he heard Al twice. He also caught a new name, Gudoy.

The enlarging black cloud drew his attention away from the women's conversation. He quit listening to them and looked ahead.

The ragged leading edge of angry clouds hovered nearly directly overhead. They turned even darker and more menacing the farther they went. The black curtain stretched from the eastern to western horizons. While the air was still unmoving, it had turned muggy. Low clouds continued to race from behind Fargo. Their leading edges were swallowed by the black maw as quickly as they collided with it. He knew cooler air was pushing against the black wall from behind, nullifying the warm, moist southern wind, trying to rise up and spill over the cool dome. But the dome was too high, too strong, hence the buildup at the stall line.

Fargo knew he was seeing one whale of a storm in the making. He hoped they'd reach the way station before it struck.

For the next hour he scanned the sky periodically, until a wisp of white rising from the ground far in the distance was emphasized by the dark backdrop. Cooking smoke, he mused. He felt they might beat the storm to the way station yet. Over his shoulder, he shouted, "At a gallop, *mademoiselles*," and spurred the stallion to move out.

The sun had not set when they rode up in front of the log-and-sod lodge, but might as well have; it was pitch dark out. Light from more than one lamp come through the two front windows.

Fargo wondered why watchdogs had not intercepted them. He shouted, "Don't shoot, Mr. Cobb. We're friendly."

The front door of the log-and-sod dwelling opened partway. Light spilled out onto the ground. The silhouette of a tall, muscular man stepped into the doorway. He held a carbine. In a no-nonsense, deep voice, he asked, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Name's Skye Fargo. I have three women with me." He walked the pinto a little closer so Amos Cobb could see him.

"That's far enough, stranger," Cobb said, and leveled the carbine on Fargo's broad chest.

Fargo sat easy in the saddle while he proceeded to tell Cobb about meeting Daniel Simms at the creek.

"Hunh," Cobb snorted, keeping the deadly end of the carbine trained on Fargo. "That don't mean nothing to me. Everybody knows Dan Simms' name. If you met up with the stage, then you ought to know who was on it. Lemme hear names."

Cautious as a whore in church, Fargo thought, then said, "Link Johnson held a Spencer .52. Three passengers. A priest and two nattily dressed drummers. You need more?"

The barrel of the carbine lowered. "Naw," Cobb said. "Climb down off them horses and come on inside. I'll have my young'uns unsaddle and take care of your mounts." He pushed the door wide open and called behind him, "Timothy, you and Francine and Junior get out here and do what you heard me say."

As Fargo and the women dismounted, the youngsters hurried around their father to obey. Fargo handed his reins to the girl, who he guessed might be twelve.

"Sure do have a purdy horse," she drawled.

Fargo smiled. "Thank you, missy. See to it he gets some oats."

"Ain't no oats, mister," one of the boys chirped. "Damn Injuns burnt 'em up."

"Aw, Junior, quit lying like that," Timothy's changing voice croaked. "Them bastards didn't git nowhere near them bags of oats."

"Stop arguing," Cobb shouted, "and do what I told you!"

The youngsters led the horses away. At the door, Fargo stopped to shake hands with Cobb, who flinched when the women entered the light and he saw their habits. He watched them file inside, then looked at Fargo and whispered, "Where'd they come from?"

"It's a long, sad story," Fargo told him. "You really don't want to hear it. I'm taking them to Cowtown."

Cobb nodded, stepped inside, then aside for Fargo to enter.

Fargo saw they'd interrupted the Cobbs' evening meal, which smelled delicious. It made his mouth water. The extralong wooden table was covered with food; two baked hens, bowls of mashed potatoes and gravy, platters covered with cloths—he knew there'd be biscuits under the cloth—kidney beans, and other food.

Five smaller children sat at the table, two on one side, three facing them from the other. All were staring transfixed at the nuns. The youngest—he was certainly no older than three—drew back in his chair as far as possible.

A red-haired woman, full-bellied with yet another child, stood at the far end of the table. She looked tired—exhausted, in fact. Cobb introduced her. "She's my wife, Wanda Sue," he said, and looked at the nuns.

Fargo moved behind them. He touched each on her shoulder as he told her name, then said, "And I'm Skye Fargo, Mrs. Cobb."

"Wanda Sue," she corrected. "Call me Wanda Sue. Ain't no city manners 'round here. Had dinner yet? We got plenty if you ain't."

"No, ma'am. We wanted to beat the storm, so we didn't stop to eat."

She laughed. "Hellfire, mister, you missed the storm by about twelve hours. Them Comanche done come and went." She laughed again, saying, "I know, you meant the rain and lightning storm." She looked at the women, nodded toward the table. "You ladies can have Tim's

and Francine's and Junior's places there next to them two young'uns of mine. They can sit on the floor to eat when they get back." She looked at Fargo and told him, "Big feller, you come down here and take my chair. I'll eat on the worktable over yonder."

"Ma'am, that's mighty nice of you, but we didn't come here to root you folks from your supper table. We'll sit on the floor."

"Have it your way," she replied. "I ain't gonna stand here and argy 'bout it." She looked down the table and barked at her little ones, "You kids stop gawking at them ladies like that and get on with eating. You hear me?"

Five forks went to work.

Cobb took his seat at the near end of the table. Fargo watched him twist off a leg and thigh from one of the baked hens.

His wife set four plates and forks on her end of the table, then moved to stand at the hearth to watch her guests fill their plates. Fargo paused after taking four biscuits. He reached back and got another one.

Wanda Sue smiled, brushed a strand of hair from over her eyes, and said, "Take another one, big feller. Like I done told you all, we got plenty." She smiled again when he took a sixth biscuit. "Francine made 'em. They're hard as rocks, but the gravy'll soften 'em up."

Fargo and the women were sitting around the walls, just starting to eat, when the older Cobb children returned. They were excited, all talking at once, telling about the Ovaro and Arabians and "them saddles whut sure do look funny."

Francine handed Fargo his Sharps and reported, "I give that there big stallion of your'n some oats like you asked."

Fargo held up a biscuit and winked. Francine blushed. She hurried to her chair and filled her plate with food. He noticed she didn't eat biscuits. Neither did the two older boys.

After the meal, the children cleared the table, then scattered to sit on the floor to watch the grown-ups drink coffee and talk. Fargo and the women moved to the table.

Cobb looked at him and said, "After coffee, we'll go get those bedrolls I saw. Where'd you put 'em, Timothy?"

"On the oats, Pa," the lad quickly answered.

Fargo watched Amos Cobb put three spoonfuls of sugar in his coffee and stir it. After taking a sip, he added more, saying, "Sorry to have to put you people up on the floor, but them Comanche set fire to the place. Timothy's and Junior's room ain't fit to be in. Neither is Francine's and Ginger's. They'll be sleeping on pallets for a while till I can get those rooms fixed up again. 'Least you'll be in out of the rain when it comes."

"The floor will be fine, Amos," Fargo replied.

"No, it won't neither," Wanda Sue said. "Amos Cobb, ain't no pregnant woman gonna sleep on my floor, not when there's a perfectly good bed in the house. Rachel Faye and Peggy can sleep with me and you till they leave."

Amos stared hard at his wife but said nothing.

Wanda Sue said, "Don't look at me like that, Amos. It's gonna be like I said."

Fargo surmised the man favored his wife right up to the end, and she welcomed the brief respite that both the Comanche and the pregnant nun gave her from wifely nighttime duties.

He helped the poor woman out, saying, "That's mighty kindly of you, ma'am. Sister Andrée will appreciate that bed for tonight." He glanced at Amos and added, "We will stay until noon tomorrow, so I can give you a hand getting those rooms back in shape."

Defeated, Amos nodded.

Fargo caught Camille and Monique exchanging glances and hints of grins. He gathered they were pleased to be separated from Andrée, if but for one night. They stiffened when the fingers snapped. Andrée had seen what Fargo saw.

Coffee finished, Amos and Fargo pushed back from the table and left to get the bedrolls. On the way out, Cobb told Timothy to light a lantern and bring it along. Cool air greeted them.

Cobb said, "It's gonna be a bitch, my friend. Been watching it stack up all day in the north and northwest."

He cradled her in his arms. She curled an arm around his neck and kissed him openmouthed, her busy, probing tongue promising much, setting him on fire. He carried Monique to the barn, to the hay she wanted, and lay her down on it, then started to mount her. She pushed him back and mewed, "Not yet, big lover."

He was on his knees, sitting on his haunches, his organ erect and throbbing hard. She stood and looked down at him, ran her fingers through his hair, saying, "I want you all the ways." She parted her feet and came to him, rubbing his face over her belly, then downward until it mated with her fluff of curly pubic hair. He took it from there.

Fargo cupped her ample mounds and squeezed as he inched his tongue down through the triangle to the hot slit. When he swirled his tongue over the swollen opening, she arched her back and moaned, "Oh, my, that's so good . . . so wonderful."

He gripped her buttocks and pulled her closer, working his tongue around in her. She took a hand away from his head and with the palm drew excited circles on his muscled back. Gasping, "I've wanted you since I first saw you," she pulled back and knelt.

"Well, honey, now you have me." He coaxed her to sit on his hardness.

She knee-walked up against him, worked his member up to ride on her flat stomach, and offered her left breast to his waiting lips. When he took it, nibbling the nipple first, she pressed his head to her and started rolling it from side to side, moving her chest in the opposite direction. He sucked in a mouthful of the pillowy swelling and circled it with his eager tongue.

She gasped, "Harder . . . suck harder . . . bite me, lover. Oh, God, yes, bite me."

He shifted to her right breast, and she arched her back to press his lips around it. As he sucked, she raised and grasped his hardness and stroked it. She gulped, "Wait. Lie back."

She pushed him down onto the hay and spread his long legs and kneeled between them. As she bent, her long brown hair cascaded over her face and tingled his thighs.

Her lips met his crown, her tongue wetting it, then her tightened mouth drew his foreskin down and she sucked hard on the blood-swollen summit before taking in as much of his length as she could. He fondled her breasts as she moved up and down on what was giving her great pleasure, making her gulp, causing her to squirm and moan. He felt her take his scrotum and start massaging it. The hot tongue worked furiously on the softer underside of his member, driving him wild, making his hips rise. He pulled her off and sat and urged her to kneel over his manhood.

She did, and parted her slickened lower lips with its head, then embraced him tightly, her breasts flattened on his chest. Fargo took her by the hips and pulled down slowly. She gulped on the penetration, then gasped as it went in deeper, "All of it, lover . . . give me all of it. Oh, God!" Her hips started gyrating and she squatted hard to help power him in all the way. When he thrust upward extra hard, she screamed, "That's it! Oh, God, yes. That's it. Yes, yes, yes! More . . . oh, God, lover . . . bite me! Please!"

He love-bit both breasts, then her shoulders and neck, all the time rocking and swaying his hips, with her bouncing on it, driving him deeper and deeper into her velvety hot tunnel.

She grabbed his head, bit and kissed his chiseled face, his neck and ears, sucked on his muscular shoulders, all the time writhing and gasping for breath.

A thousand locomotives roared in Fargo's ears. The staccato of hail tap-danced on the roof. A hellish wind buffeted the barn. Monique screamed happily, "It's coming. It's coming. I can feel it coming!"

Her love tunnel spasmed around him and started milking as the roof disappeared. Huge bolts of lightning rent the sky, struck outside the barn, and exploded. Monstrous thunder shook the barn. Her head tossed back, and she screamed again, "Oh, God, this is fantastic. Come with me, lover man. Come with me and the storm."

He erupted inside her, the cold rain all over both of them.

Gasping, "Oh . . . oh . . . oh," Monique released her

grip on him and fell backward. He tightened his hold on her hips so she wouldn't topple onto the hay, and kept their mating firm. She lay bent back in his strong grasp, limp and gasping. Flashes of lightning painted their glistening wet bodies in stark contrasting blacks and whites. He felt her final contraction as she yelled skyward, "I love it! Oh, God, how I love it, love it, love it!" Looking at him, she smiled hugely and said, "Lover, you blew the roof off and let the wind and rain come in."

He lifted and pitched her onto hay piled high in a corner, leapt to land facedown beside her, and burrowed to escape the cold mist of rain whipping over the naked walls. She followed him into the hay and cuddled close to him, one hand on his nape, the other squeezing what gave her so much joy. They watched the lightning play on the hay above them and blinked each time a clap of thunder shook the barn. They were quiet now, breathing easy, warm and content.

She whispered, "Lover, I never saw a roof blow off before now. It was thrilling."

"A tornado," he said.

"Tornado?"

"Yes. A violent twisting of wind. We're lucky it didn't destroy the barn. We could have been sucked up in the funnel right along with the hay and barn, then carried far away before being slammed to the ground." She gasped. He went on. "By now the tornado has probably skipped south and snatched your bloomers off that mesquite."

"Fargo, I love you." He felt her grip tighten, her parted lips searching for his. She rolled atop him, cupped his face in her hands, and they kissed openmouthed for a long time, with him rubbing her back and buttocks.

Monique murmured in his mouth, "That feels good. Don't stop." She broke the kiss to catch her breath. She rolled onto her side and entwined her fingers in his.

He asked, "Where's your ring?"

He felt her tense. She mumbled, "Ring? What ring? I have no ring."

He knew she was lying. Father Hardaway had been too observant to have made a mistake. Fargo said, "I know none of you are nuns."

Monique snuggled against him, mewed, "Lover, let's not talk about that. Please don't destroy this moment for me. Please?"

"Monique, I have to know what's happening. We must talk about it."

"Oh, Fargo, please, please, don't do this to me. Be patient. Soon you will know everything. Don't ask me now. I can't tell you. Really, I cannot."

He pressed, "What's waiting in Cowtown? Or who? What am I facing?"

She sighed, "Oh, God, I knew this would happen, but I was going crazy, wanting you in me. Ever since I listened to that ranch girl having you in the loft, I've ached to have what gave her so much delight, made her scream."

"Monique, you're trying to change the subject. We have the rest of the night to enjoy each other's bodies. In between, I want answers. Now, what happens in Cowtown?"

She sat up and threw the hay off her, stared up into the misty rain. After a moment she turned slowly and touched his face. Sadly she said, "It's over, lover. I must go now."

He pulled her back down and said, "No, Monique, it isn't over. You threw yourself at me. I responded favorably. Then I asked you a simple question and you refused to answer. Honey, you can't have it both ways. If you want more of me, then—"

She rose abruptly, scampered out of the hay, and strode for the entrance, sobbing. He watched her leave, then went to the doorway and looked at the lodge.

Skye Fargo thought on many things.

Two names kept flashing in his mind: Achmid and Al Cazara.

7

Two of Wanda Sue's Rhode Island Red roosters crowed from the top of the henhouse, answering others perched on rails at the corral. A light, refreshing breeze that drifted from the north riffled their feathers. Dawn broke to a clear sky. A gorgeous orange ball rose slowly and beamed warmth down on the way station.

The nuns ate Wanda Sue's bacon and eggs and Francine's hard biscuits. Now and then Camille and Andrée cast glances at Monique, who sat on the other side of the table.

Finally, Monique leaned toward them and whispered angrily, "Stop looking at me like that."

Andrée replied just as quietly, "You told him."

"No, I did not," she answered.

"Was he as good as he looks?" Camille asked without looking up.

"Better," Monique snapped. "Now, leave me alone."

"Where's the ring?" Andrée queried, her expression showing concern.

"Where it always is," Monique said in a hushed tone. "On the loop."

Andrée reminded her, "It wasn't back at that creek."

"I made a mistake," Monique admitted, her defensiveness draining. She glanced at Andrée and added, "Satisfied, darling?"

Camille wasn't interested in the ring. She rested her elbows on the table, nibbled on a piece of bacon, then asked, "How long is he, Monique? How big around? Don't lie."

Monique parted her palms, then formed a C with a thumb and forefinger. "Maybe more, but not less," she said.

Camille was impressed. She pursed her lips around the slice of bacon, arched an eyebrow. After swallowing the bacon, she smiled wickedly and said, "I don't believe you. If you had that between your legs, you would still be where he laid you."

"That's enough," Andrée warned.

Monique glowered at her, then whispered to Camille, "When he blew, a tornado took the roof off the barn. Oh, God, Cam, it was the most thrilling experience in my life. Thunder boomed on my body. Lightning flashed down on me. Cold rain beat on me. And he throbbed and pulsed inside me. God, but he was so fantastic."

Camille moaned, "Don't say any more or I'll leave a damp spot on this chair. Does he kiss good?"

"All over." Monique smiled, and Camille moaned again.

But Andrée left half her breakfast uneaten. She rose and went outside.

Fargo, Amos, and the Cobb children were surveying the roofless barn when she walked up and said, "We go, *mon*—?" She caught herself and quickly modified the unfinished statement. "Can we go, Mr. Fargo?"

"Yeah," he told her, "we can go. There's nothing I can do to help out here. By now the roof's in the next county. Tell the ladies to get ready. I'll saddle the horses. Don't forget to bring my bedroll and Sharps."

She nodded, hiked the hem of her habit, and hurried toward the lodge.

The older Cobb children carried the saddles, tack, and other gear to the corral. Fargo draped his saddlebags over his shoulder. Amos fell in beside him and they followed the youngsters.

Fargo was saddling Andrée's chestnut mare when she and the other two women walked up. Andrée went to the other side of the mare and looked at him. "I'll finish saddling my horse," she quipped. "That way I'll know it's done correctly."

He backed away and got in his saddle. Amos shook his hand, saying, "Take care now, pardner." In a much

lower voice he added, "You wanna watch that bitch. She's got a burr under her saddle."

Fargo grinned and nodded. "Sorry about that roof, Amos. I didn't have a damn thing to do with it blowing off."

Amos chuckled. "Uh, huh, I bet you didn't."

Fargo nodded and winked to the children as he rode out of the corral. "Wait for me," Monique called to him, but he ignored her and headed due north on the stage route.

They rode in a tight diamond formation with Fargo in the lead and Andrée at the rear. Camille and Monique made no effort to hold down their voice levels as the latter described in vivid detail her nocturnal romp with Fargo, who heard every word of it. Camille interrupted several times to have her repeat certain parts of the steamy story that he knew Monique had stretched considerably. Camille would sigh, "Oh, my God. Really? Go on, Monique." Monique would then add to the truth. And so it went with the one embellishing, the other sighing. Now and then Andrée would punctuate their passionate conversation with disbelieving snorts.

The sun's warmth combined with the moisture left by the night's rain to explode the flora covering the rolling landscape in a myriad of colors. A vast growth of buttercups was dappled with patches of other wildflowers that included yet another stream of bluebonnets and a bed of Indian paintbrush. Legions of bees darted among an endless shield of white butterflies that hovered low over the blaze of color. The sweet refreshing fragrance of spring was everywhere. Fargo inhaled deeply.

Andrée cleared her throat and reported, "Mr. Fargo, look behind you."

He looked over his shoulder. Four horsemen were tracking them, passing through a field of buttercups that covered the rise on top of which one man rode. They were about a mile away. The all-white garb of the two Moroccans made them clearly visible in the yellow flowers. The pair of dark duster-clad desperadoes stuck out like sore thumbs.

Fargo said, "I see them."

"What do we do?" Camille asked nervously.

"Nothing," Fargo replied. "They're cowards. They'll wait for darkness, then sneak in on us."

Andrée snorted and said, "Our horses can easily outdistance theirs. We can leave them behind."

"I know," he began, "but running wouldn't change anything, only delay the inevitable. They'd eventually catch up to us. My guess is they'll make their move after we get to Waco."

As he spoke, the four riders bolted forward in a dead run, streaked north as though they'd seen the devil himself. For a moment Fargo wondered what had triggered their fast departure, then he saw a line of Comanche top a rise beyond the one on which the men rode. The Indians halted. They were quickly joined by many others who came up behind them. Together they watched the fleeing riders.

Fargo squinted to knock off the glare of the sun and scanned among the savages to look for the two McCurdy women, but saw neither. He looked at his female charges and said, "All right, ladies, let's put a lather on our mounts."

As a unit, they spurred their horses into a hard run and left the pretty wildflowers far behind. Fargo glanced over his shoulder twice and saw the Comanche weren't interested in giving chase. He kept the fast pace awhile longer, then slowed to a gallop, and finally slackened to an easy lope to cool down the Ovaro and Arabians.

He eased up beside the women and said, "Okay, ladies, you can relax now. They don't want us. But keep your eyes open for Achmid and his crowd."

They reformed as before. For the next two hours they rode without speaking, preoccupied with watching for the Moroccans, Andrée constantly glancing behind her to see if the Comanche were coming.

They were going up a grassy slope when Fargo halted and raised a hand for them to stop. He cocked his head and listened for a few seconds. "Trouble up ahead."

Camille said, "He's right. I hear it too."

Monique mumbled, "I don't hear anything."

"Gunfire," Fargo explained. "Wait here while I go

take a look." He rode ahead and halted to peer over the crest.

The downslope flowed into an extremely wide meadow. The road went through a large stand of tall trees interspersed with massive piles of rocks. A stagecoach had halted between two of the outcrops. On top of each stood a man with his neckerchief pulled up over his nose. Both held rifles. A third robber, who Fargo saw was armed with a six-gun, menaced the stage driver and the empty-handed man seated beside him.

Fargo withdrew his Sharps and put the robber at the stage in its sights. Centering on the man's chest, he squeezed the trigger. The slug's impact knocked the fellow against the coach. By the time he crumpled to the ground, Fargo had the Sharps reloaded and aimed at one of the men standing on the rocks. He squeezed off the bullet. It hit the man's left shoulder and spun him around. The robber tried to stay on his feet, but slipped and fell behind the cluster of rocks. The third robber jumped to the ground, leapt into his saddle, and whipped his horse hell-bent for leather to get out of there.

Fargo reloaded and returned the Sharps to its saddle case, withdrew his Colt, and spurred the pinto over the crest. He rode straight for the outcrop where he'd seen the robber fall. Halfway to it he saw the wounded man had managed to mount up and was now fleeing the scene, leaning low over his horse's neck, heading north parallel with the other survivor. Fargo swerved right and went to the stage.

The driver and fellow riding shotgun were on the ground, looking down on the fallen robber, whose body twitched in its final death throes. As Fargo rode up, the coach door opened. Two women and a bespectacled gent stepped out and stared at the dead man. Fargo stayed in the saddle and inquired, "Anybody hurt? Did they get anything?"

The driver, a younger man with a long face, nodded toward the corpse and chuckled. "He's more'n hurt. I'd say he's graveyard dead. Naw, you showed up before they could take anything." Noticing his passengers, he said, "You sisters all right? How 'bout you, preacher?"

The two middle-aged women stared at Fargo and slowly nodded. The preacher croaked nervously, "The wages of sin is death." He spun and put his hands on the rocks, leaned over, and started puking up his fear.

As he did, Andrée, followed by the other two habited women, rode up and halted behind Fargo. All eyes turned to them. The driver jerked his hat off and stammered, "Er, uh, er . . . 'morning. I mean evening, er, uh—"

Amused, Fargo gave him the word for which his addled brain searched. "Sisters. They're with me. How far out of Waco are we?"

"Uh, three hours," the driver finally answered. "Robbers' Gap is three hours from Waco. Mister, you're a damn good shot. Plugged the bastard dead in the heart." He squatted and pulled the neckerchief down, then gasped, "Shit, it's Benny Gunch." He looked up at Fargo and explained, "Mister, I wouldn't want to be you for nothing in this world. You should've killed the other two while you were at it. Now Sam and Horace Gunch are gonna be looking for you for killing their no-count brother. And if they ain't enough, you can bet their no-good uncles, Marvin and Dunk, will be too, soon as they hear 'bout it." He shook his head slowly, as though what he said was final and true.

Fargo wasn't concerned. He suggested, "Haul the son of a bitch out of the road, then turn your stage around and head back to Waco. There's at least two dozen Comanche coming this way."

"Comanche," chorused the two females. They collapsed in each other's arms and started sobbing, one wailing, "They will rape us, Jenny. Oh, dear, oh, dear me."

The preacher, braced against the outcrop, swiveled to face the gathering when he heard her say rape. He pointed a quivering bony finger at the nuns and hissed, "Leave the papist whores for the savages. Yes, leave them and the rest of us can escape."

Fargo snarled, "You shut your sanctimonious mouth, mister, and climb back in that coach. One more word out of you and—"

The preacher didn't want to hear Fargo's penalty. He shot for the coach's door and leapt inside.

The driver muttered, "Levy, you take the bastard by the feet and help me get him out of the way."

Fargo watched them carry Benny Gunch behind one of the outcrops. They came back wiping their hands on their britches and climbed back aboard. While they continued through Robbers' Gap to turn around, Fargo led the women through it in the opposite direction and waited to accompany the stagecoach back to Waco.

Neither the Moroccans nor the Comanche were seen during the three-hour ride to Waco. However, immediately after clearing the gap, Fargo did leave the women under Levy's protection while he cut off at an angle to see if he could spot their adversaries. He saw neither group, but he did cut across four fresh sets of shod hoofprints. That told him the Moroccans had gone by while the stage was halted. They would be waiting in Waco. That was fine with Fargo. He rode back and joined the others.

They arrived on the outskirts of Waco at sunset. Six yapping dogs, a bitch and her litter of plump puppies, greeted the stage, focused on the left front wheel.

The driver was ready for them. He took a handful of small stones from a bucket on the floorboard and threw them at the dogs, yelling, "Get outta here, Banjo, and take your brood with you!" It took two more hands full of pelting rocks before the bitch broke off her attack on the wheel and hightailed it for safety. Her perplexed, clumsy-footed puppies stumbled awkwardly as they hurried to follow.

The driver halted in front of the stage office adjacent to the Waco Hotel, a two-story structure with weather-beaten sides. On the corner across the street was Joe Gilly's saloon. About a dozen horses stood hitched to the rails that ran the length of the saloon on Fargo's side. A cacophony of boisterous noise spilled through the double doors. The sounds of a piano and women singing off-key pierced the raucous noise of men encouraging them on.

Fargo wondered if any of the Gunch men were inside, and presumed they were, not that it mattered. Fargo

wasn't looking for trouble, hoped none would come, but wouldn't back down in the face of it. He needed a drink and intended to have it in Joe Gilly's place.

But first, he had to deposit the three women in a relatively safe place for the night. By now, he reasoned, the Moroccans had seen them. They were lurking somewhere in the town, watching every move he and the women made. Fargo looked at the hotel, then at the saloon. He didn't like the distance separating the two structures. He decided on the saloon. He told his women to dismount and go inside the stage office and wait for him, that he'd be back for them shortly. Andrée didn't like it, but she obeyed. He waited until they were inside before he went to the saloon.

He paused outside the swinging doors and surveyed the crowd. The spacious room was box-shaped. In the corner opposite where he stood was an elevated semicircular stage, its outer edge lined with footlights. Jammed in the back corner of the stage was an upright piano played by a tall gangly fellow wearing a bowler.

Stairs led up from the corner at Fargo's left to a railed walkway that fronted the rooms on the second level. As Fargo looked up at the second level a shapely, hip-swinging whore led a dusty young cowboy up the stairs.

Fargo didn't see anyone who acted as though they might have a bad shoulder wound. He stepped into the smoky room and went to stand at the near end of the bar.

The profusely perspiring bartender asked what he'd have, "Whiskey or beer?"

"Bourbon," Fargo replied. "No glass." He put two silver dollars on the bar.

When the fellow replaced them with the bottle of amber liquid, Fargo asked, "Where can I find Joe Gilly?"

"You know Joe?" the man asked, doubt already in his tone.

"Nope. Never saw him, either."

"Joe's not around, mister. He's still at his ranch."

"Is he expected?"

"Never know. I'm busy. You need anything else?"

"The canary that can't sing any better than me. What's her name? And where will I find the sheriff?"

The bartender answered, "Sheriff Miller and Deputy Gaines aren't in town. There out talking with Joe." He glanced at the willowy brunette on stage. "Name's Irene, but you'll have to get in line. Irene's popular."

Fargo nodded. He wasn't interested in her body, only where it lay. He drank from the bottle while waiting for her to finish mangling the song she sang, and the pianist man played so badly that Fargo couldn't recognize the tune.

For her finale, she swan-dived into the cluster of arms upstretched to catch her. Hands went all over her slim body, down her tight bodice, up underneath the hem. She squealed and giggled and squirmed, made a big to-do over all the male attention being heaped on her.

A bull of a man strode from the middle of the bar, shoving and knocking away all but four of her admirers. He intimidated two of those with hard stares. They shrugged, grinned, and moved back. The other two stood Irene on her feet. As she smoothed her dress, the barrel-chested fellow slammed a fist into one of the men's face, then drove his other beefy fist into the other fellow's stomach. Both men went down, writhing on the grimy floor. Bull picked Irene up by the waist, draped her over his shoulder, and headed for the stairs.

Fargo intercepted him at the lower landing. Their eyes met and locked. Holding the fixation, Fargo dragged a finger across his mustache and muttered, "Fella, you jumped the waiting line. I'm next for her. Hand her to me real gentle like."

Bull guffawed and put a boot on the first step. Fargo grabbed Irene under the arms and pulled her to him. Bull spun and cocked his right fist. Fargo smashed the bourbon bottle on Bull's face. Bull reeled, shook his head to clear it, and drew back to pulverize Fargo, who dodged the onrushing monstrous fist and kneed the brute in the groin. Bull's hands went to his hurt spot as he gaped at Fargo, who stepped around him and went up the stairs. The men at the bar started applauding and whistling.

On the top landing Fargo asked her which room was hers. "Last door on the right side," she said, giggling. "Are you as bad in bed as you are on stairs? Please say yes."

He didn't answer her until after he dumped her on her bed. Irene started shucking her clothes immediately. Fargo stopped her, saying, "How much do you figure to make the rest of the night?"

"Jesus," she cooed, "are you good enough to last all night? Please say yes."

"How much?" he repeated.

She sat up and rolled her eyes while coming up with the amount. "Twenty dollars. Twenty-five, if I have to take it in the butt a few times. You want me regular or—"

"Neither," Fargo broke in. "I need your bed for the night. Would thirty dollars get it for me?"

"Damn right," she hurried to reply. "For thirty you can have any damn thing you want." No sooner said than she drew back and put a worried expression on her face. "Uh, mister, you aren't going to hit on me, are you? I don't go for the really rough stuff."

"No." He grinned. "You're safe with me." He counted out thirty dollars and pitched them beside her on the bed.

She scooped up the money as she came off the bed. "You sure you don't want any part of me, mister?"

"Just the bed. Maybe you can get one of the other girls to let you work in her room when she isn't using it. That door does lock, doesn't it?"

"Oh, sure. No key needed. You'll see." She tucked the money in a porcelain jar on a small table and said, "It better still be in here when I look in the morning, or your big self is dead."

He chuckled and watched Irene's hip movements as she sashayed out of the room. He made an attempt at straightening up the bed linen, then went to the stage office.

When Fargo came in, Andrée, flanked by Monique and Camille, sat stiff-backed in a chair facing the door. All three had hands folded in their laps. Andrée's

icy stare met his eyes. She spoke frostily as he walked to them. "Where have you been? Why did you make us sit here all this time? Have you no respect for women's needs? Do you—?"

He clamped a hand over her mouth. "Lady, you're wearing mighty thin on me. I don't want to hear from you anymore tonight." He removed his hand and looked at Monique. "I have a place for the three of you to stay. Not the best, but . . ." He paused to glance at Andrée before continuing. "But at least I'll be close if I'm needed. Follow me."

Outside, he stopped at their horses. The women said nothing as he removed two bedrolls. But when he headed for the saloon, Andrée broke her silence. "No! I'll not go there!"

Fargo kept walking. He heard Camille start chattering in French.

Monique called to him, "Wait! We're coming. All of us."

He paused on the side porch to wait for them. Monique stepped up on the porch and came to him, but Camille halted in the street to hold on to Andrée when she balked. In a hushed tone Monique explained, "Andrée had a bad experience in a Parisian place like this. She's afraid to go inside. Be easy on her. Please?"

Fargo wasn't so sure he believed her. "Oh? What do you mean by take it easy? Bad experience? That's bullshit, Monique, and you know it. The woman isn't afraid of anything. She has ice water flowing through her veins. She didn't seem afraid to go inside Elena Suárez's cantina."

"No, you're wrong, lover. She is scared. The cantina was nothing like this place. It reminds her of Le Bon Voyage. Four gentlemen forced Andrée to submit to them. That was a very long time ago, but she still remembers. The cantina was quiet. Listen to all those rowdy men shouting, and that horrible music. Andrée knows something bad will happen to her. Please, go talk to her, assure her she is safe with you."

He looked thoughtfully at Andrée for a few seconds, then stepped to the ground and went to her. Clamping both bedrolls under his right arm, he held his left arm

out to her and said, "Take my arm, Andrée. They will stare at you, yes. They'll stare at all of us. But nobody will say anything. Neither would any of them dare touch one of us. Take my arm and walk close to me."

Reluctantly, she placed her hand on his forearm and gripped tightly. He noticed her fear wasn't so great. Andrée was steady as a rock. He told Camille and Monique to walk ahead, that he and Andrée would be right behind them.

The instant the two women pushed through the double doors, they halted abruptly. The loud noise started fading. Somebody hollered for the piano player to "shut that fool thing up!" When his last piano notes faded to silence, so did all sounds in Joe Gilly's saloon. Nobody moved a muscle. They either cowered behind someone or something, or stood gaping at the gray habits and white wimples.

Fargo banged the swinging doors against the women's rumps. They flinched and took a pace forward. He and Andrée stepped inside. Fargo nudged Monique and told her, "The stairs are to your left, Sister. We're going upstairs, so start walking."

Both she and Camille averted their eyes from the men's stares and watched where they were going. Fargo guided Andrée past a poker table, stared two goggle-eyed men into moving back, and led her to the bottom of the stairs. Monique was already halfway up, Camille right behind, when the bullish man charged across the room. He growled obscenities as he flung chairs and toppled tables out of his path.

Fargo dropped the bedrolls and pushed Andrée out of the way. Bull absorbed two hard blows before he powered into Fargo and locked him in a viselike bear hug. Fargo raked a boot heel down the man's shin as he was spun around and rammed into the wall. The wall shook and the windowpanes rattled. Then Bull lifted Fargo, carried him to a poker table, and slammed him down on top of it. Chips, beer mugs, and money flew in all directions. The crowd drew back.

The man stepped back and formed his hamish hands to strangle. Snarling, he grabbed Fargo by the throat. Fargo

bent his left leg at the knee and withdrew his Arkansas toothpick. The crowd sucked in their collective breaths and moved back farther.

Fargo put the deadly tip of the stiletto under the behemoth's right eye while staring into his eyes. "Don't make me do it," Fargo choked out, and he pricked the tender flesh enough to draw blood.

The huge man's grip relaxed. Fargo kept the tip in place. The fellow let go and eased back cautiously. The Trailsman stood, flipped a silver dollar to the bartender, and told him, "Serve this man a beer for regaining his sanity." When the puzzled man tensed and blinked, Fargo asked, "What's your name?"

Bull licked the trickle of blood from his lips and answered, "Marvin. Marvin Gunch."

8

"Is it, now?" Fargo mused aloud. He sheathed the Arkansas toothpick. Watching Marvin's big thumb flick blood from under the eye and off the fleshy cheek, Fargo told him, "Well, Marvin, you and I need to have a little talk."

The barkeep approaching with the mug of beer interrupted Fargo. The little man wasn't about to get too close to the pair of big brawlers. He halted more than an arm's length from them and held the mug out to Marvin. When Marvin grabbed it away from him, the man hurried back to the bar.

Fargo waited for Marvin to take a drink, then continued. "Have you heard that one of your nephews was killed today?"

Marvin dragged the back of his free hand across his mouth before answering, "Naw. Which one?"

Fargo put his arm around Marvin's shoulders and nodded toward the stairs. "Got a job for you, Marvin. We'll talk while you're doing it." He led the huge man to the bedrolls and said, "Pick 'em up and take them upstairs. The nun and I will be right behind you." As Gunch stooped to retrieve the bedrolls, Fargo told Camille and Monique to go on up and turn right.

Going up the stairs, Fargo said, "I killed Benny at Robbers' Gap a few hours ago."

Marvin paused, turned, and squinted at Fargo. "You killed Benny? What for?"

"He and his brothers, Sam and Horace, were holding up the stage to San Antonio. There were defenseless

women on that stage. I also shot Sam, but he got away. So did Horace. Keep walking, Marvin. I don't like standing on stairs."

Marvin grunted and went on up.

At the top, Fargo said, "We're going to Irene's room. Know where it is?" Marvin nodded. "Sam has a shoulder wound. Next time you see him, or Horace, tell them to stay clear of me unless they want to get hurt."

"Dunk ain't gonna like what you done. Dunk and Benny was close. Me, I don't give a shit. Benny was bad through and through. Did anybody on the stage get hurt? Them women get raped?"

Fargo swung Irene's door open and motioned the nuns inside. He told Marvin to set the bedrolls on the floor just inside the room. After he'd complied, Fargo said, "Nobody on the stage was hurt. Scared, yes, but not hurt. I don't cotton to men scaring helpless females or stealing other folk's money."

"Me neither," Marvin agreed emphatically. "I might shovel horseshit all day, but it's honest money I get for doing it. Any man that'd throw a woman down and take her oughter be shot. They was lucky it didn't happen. Benny and Sam are bad about taking women. So, mister, you did right far as I'm concerned. But like I done said, Dunk won't."

Fargo handed him two silver dollars. "Wait for me at the bar. I have to see about these nuns, then I'll join you. There's something else I want to discuss with you."

Marvin smiled, patted Fargo on the back, and headed for the bar.

The Trailsman stepped inside the room and shut the door. He leaned against it, scanning the women's expressionless faces. Monique and Camille sat side by side on the edge of the bed, Andrée in a chair turned to face him. He said, "I know this isn't the best of quarters, but at least you'll be handy to me, and relatively safe. This door locks on the inside. By the time anybody broke it down, I'd hear you screaming and be up here."

Monique wasn't concerned about the door. She said, "That man could have killed you."

Camille quickly added, "You have a big gun. Why didn't you shoot him?"

Andrée hissed, "You lied, Mr. Fargo. You said nobody would touch any of us. This is a bad place. I don't like it and I want out. Take me to the hotel."

"No. All of you are to stay here where I can keep an eye on you. I've been in hundreds of saloons worse than this one. You'll be okay. It's for one night only, actually a few hours." He shifted his gaze to Monique and said, "How does it go? 'Ye of little faith'? There was never any doubt in my mind as to the outcome. I'd already fought Marvin once this evening."

When Camille and Monique gasped, he explained, "We had a quarrel when I came over here to arrange for this room. That's why it took me so long to come get you ladies at the stage office." He looked at Camille and told her, "I didn't shoot Marvin because he wasn't toting iron. I don't shoot unarmed men."

The two women sighed and shook their heads.

Andrée said, "We need to bathe and visit the—"

Fargo's upraised hand interrupted her. "So do I. I'll see that your needs are taken care of. May take a minute, so you'll have to pat your foot awhile longer. I'll have some food brought up too. When I leave, one of you lock this door. Don't open it to any voice except mine. Understand?"

Camille got up and came to him. She smiled and said, "I'll lock the door behind you. Fargo, I'm dying for a drink. Could you send up a bottle of bourbon?"

He glanced at the other two and muttered, "Er, uh, how many glasses?"

"No glasses, big man. We drink from the bottle."

Fargo was impressed. He nodded, shot her a wink, and left. He found Marvin wedged between two lanky cowpunchers at the middle of the bar. The piano player was trying to pound the keys off the piano, Irene sang off-key at the top of her lungs, and the crowd of men anxiously awaited her swan dive.

Fargo squirmed in beside Marvin. The cowpuncher jerked his head around and started to glower at him, but changed his mind and smiled hugely when he saw Fargo.

"Come on in," he chirped. "Plenty of room. Me and Davey there, we was leaving anyhow."

"No need," Fargo suggested. He put a silver dollar on the bartop and told the bartender, "Give this young man a shot of something mean." He winked at the kid, then turned to Marvin. "I have a job for you. A paying job. You want it?"

"Mebbe. Who you want me to hurt? How much is it worth to you?"

"Ten dollars?"

Marvin was definitely interested. He turned sideways and rested an elbow on the bar. "Mister, that kinda money would get you ten busted backs. What can I do for you?"

"Would you recognize an Arab if you saw one?"

"A-rab? What's that? Don't reckon I ever seen one."

"A person. In this instance, a man. I should say two men. They're easy enough to recognize. First, they're dark-skinned. You know, much like some Mexicans. They stay out in the sun a lot. And they wear long white gowns and white headdresses."

"Gowns? Women's clothes? They sound sissified to me. I wouldn't want to be around 'em."

"Believe me, Marvin, they aren't sissified. No. They're mean sonsabitches. Don't let those gowns and flowing headdresses fool you into thinking they'd be easy in a fight. I've took them on a couple of times already, so I know. You have to kill them to stop them."

Marvin chuckled. "Shit, mister, I know I can bust anybody's back that wears a gown. Where are they?"

"Someplace here in Waco. But sooner or later they will come here. When they do, there'll be one or two men with them, or at least nearby. They're easy to spot too. Both are Texans. The bad kind. Tall and well-built. They'll be wearing dusters with six-guns underneath. I don't want any of these four men anywhere near Irene's room. That's where you come in. I'll pay you ten dollars to stand guard outside the room. It's an all-night job. Do you want it?"

Without hesitation Marvin replied, "Sure. Let's see now if I have it straight. All I gotta do is be outside Irene's

room, and if I see a A-rab or a duster, then I break his back. That it?"

"You got it, Marvin." Fargo counted out ten dollars and handed them to him, saying, "I'll be down here, drinking and playing cards. If anything happens, you holler and I'll come running."

"This is the easiest job I ever had."

"Uh, huh, I sure as hell hope so. Get a refill on that beer and take it up with you. You start right now." Fargo motioned for the bartender to give Marvin a fresh beer and a bottle of bourbon.

"Uh, what's the bourbon for, mister? I don't drink the stuff."

"A test, my friend. When you go up, knock on the door, tell your name, and say you have a bottle of bourbon I told you to deliver."

Marvin nodded.

Fargo paid the bartender, then shoved his way through the crowd of men at the stage and stood at its center front. Irene ended a yodel, backed up, ran, and swan-dived. Fargo caught her at the waist. He had no competition. The men simply parted when they recognized him.

She purred, "Lucky you. Kiss me, you brute."

He kissed her openmouthed. The crowd applauded . . . weakly. He put her on her feet and said, "I need you to help me with three things, honey."

Her eyes widened in anticipation. She smiled wickedly and said cheerily, "Goody. That's exactly how many holes I have."

Fargo grimaced. "No, no, Irene. I meant other things."

She forced a saddened expression and sighed, "Well, later, perhaps. What can I do for you, big man?"

"Name's Fargo, ma'am. Skye Fargo."

"Okay. Then what can I do for you, Skye Fargo?"

"Show me where you girls bathe, where you use the toilet, and introduce me to the cook. All for one dollar."

Irene held her palm out. He dropped his last silver dollar in it. She said, "Follow me."

First they went to the kitchen and met the fattest cook Fargo ever saw. Little Richard weighed every ounce of four hundred pounds and had a high soprano voice. But

his kitchen smelled delicious. Fargo ordered four of his best steaks with trimmings and asked him to deliver them to Irene's room. Little Richard's pat on Fargo's back nearly knocked him down.

Next, Irene took him out back of the saloon. Four wooden tubs were shielded by old sheets that went around four posts. The sheets were riddled with holes, several large enough to poke a head through. When he fingered one, she remarked, "Hell, we don't mind 'em watching. Advertising the merchandise is what Joe says. The toilet is over here." She went behind the bath area and pointed to an unusually wide shack. "Best four-holer in Waco," she claimed. "Plenty of cracks and gaps in the planks. Lets all the stink out." She smiled.

Fargo nodded. "Where will I find the livery?"

"Uh, you said three things. The livery makes four." She held her palm out.

"Honey, I'm fresh out of coins. Can I owe you?"

"You can screw, can't you?"

"Oh, sure, but not right now. Maybe later."

"You're lying, of course. I saw those three women. I didn't think Catholic nuns were supposed to screw, but that one's pure pregnant. You get her that way?"

"No. Which way to the livery?"

"Out front, look right. It's on the right side of the street a ways. You'll smell it. Follow your nose. Anything else?"

He shook his head. She led him back inside the kitchen. Little Richard was spreading the steaks on large plates. Fargo released Irene to return to her warbling, then told the cook he would help carry the food.

When Marvin saw them come onto the walkway, he rose from his squat by the door. Fargo didn't see the bottle and asked about it. Marvin said, "One of them nuns stuck her hand out and snatched it from me. I didn't know them Catholic nuns was supposed to drink hard liquor."

Fargo chuckled and rapped on the door, saying, "Open up, ladies. It's me and the chef."

The door parted by a head's width. Camille peered through the gap, then pulled the door open and stepped

aside. Fargo saw they were not wearing their wimples. Without hers, Andrée was stunning. Shoulder-length silver-white hair complimented her ice-blue eyes. She would be a prize for any man, Fargo thought. He pulled a small table away from the front wall and set his two plates on it. Little Richard placed his two on the table and departed. Camille shut and locked the door.

"Smells terrific," Monique offered.

Fargo sat on the floor and asked Monique to hand him a plate of food. Andrée sat in a chair to eat, Monique on the bed, and Camille next to Fargo. After slicing off and taking a bite of steak, she asked, "Is that fellow outside our door going to be there all night?"

"Yep. Why did you open the door for him? I told you not to do that."

"He said he had the bourbon. I thought you would want me to."

"Don't do it again. Next time Achmid might be standing there beside him."

Andrée sounded almost civil when she asked, "Have you made arrangements for us to bathe and use . . . "

When she let her question trail off unfinished, he nodded and answered, "Yes. You can bathe and visit the best toilet in Waco when we finish here. Pass that bourbon to me, Camille."

They completed their meals in silence. Camille put his empty plate on the table with hers. Monique stacked hers and Andrée's.

Fargo remained seated on the floor with his back against the wall, watching them don their wimples. "That looks uncomfortable," he commented. "Is it?"

"Sometimes," Camille volunteered. "But you get used to them." She glanced at the others. They nodded, and she told Fargo they were ready to go.

Fargo stood, opened the door, and told Marvin he could go to the bar for a while. "But don't leave," he added. "The night job isn't over."

Marvin nodded and hurried away.

Fargo led them single-file down the stairs, through the crowded saloon, and into the kitchen. Little Richard was too busy stirring a big pot of something that emitted a lot

of steam to notice their passage through his area and out the back door.

Andrée balked the instant she saw the sheets. "Mr. Fargo, surely you don't expect us to, to—"

Scratching his chin, he eyed her and said, "I'll be right here to make sure you're all right. Uh, the toilet is this way." He took long strides moving into view of the tumbledown shack. Nodding toward it, he said, "That's it over there."

Andrée looked at him as though she considered him absolutely insane. Monique muttered, "I don't care. I'm desperate." She started walking toward it.

Camille shrugged and mumbled, "Me too." She caught up with Monique.

Fargo heard Andrée mutter, "What the hell." She too headed for the shack.

Fargo went inside the bath area and hung three buckets of water over the glowing coals in a pit, then went back outside and waited.

They came back holding hands and half-running. He showed them the pile of towels and washclothes, pointed to cakes of soap on the rims of the tubs, and warned, "Use a towel to take those hot-water buckets off the hooks. The handles might be hot." He touched the brim of his hat and turned to leave.

Andrée's voice halted him in midstride. "I don't want to see you watching us through one of those holes."

Grim-jawed, he replied icily, "Ma'am, I'm no Peeping Tom. Besides, none of you has anything I haven't seen at least a hundred times."

"Or felt," he heard Monique whisper.

He shook his head disgustedly and continued walking. He moved far enough into the darkness to see all the approaches to the sheets, then squatted to watch and listen.

He heard them fill the tubs, then gripe about the water's temperature, and finally get in it. About ten minutes had passed when the back kitchen door swung open. Light spilled out to the sheets.

Fargo stood, resting his hand on the butt of his Colt. One of the duster-clad men dashed through the doorway

and ran crouched toward the sheets. Fargo drew and fired at the swift-moving man, but missed. The women screamed. The shot had intimidated him, though. Before Fargo could squeeze off another round, the man veered right and ran zigzagging around the far corner of the saloon.

Monique's voice screamed above the other two, "Help! Help! Where are you, Fargo?"

He lifted a sheet. "Right here, ma'am." Three sets of very widened eyes peered over the sides of the tubs. "Achmid and his crowd have found us." Lowering the sheet, he added, "Baths are over, ladies. It's time to dry off and dress."

He'd hardly gotten back to his position to watch than Camille parted the sheets and stepped out fully dressed. She glanced around nervously before she looked at him and asked, "Where do I go?"

He walked to her, saying, "Stay put. Are the others about ready?"

"Yes," Andrée answered. "You can enter if you wish."

He stayed next to Camille. After a few seconds the sheets parted and they stepped out into the light. Fargo nodded toward the door and told them to wait before going inside. He motioned them forward and watched in all directions while following Monique. They halted outside the doorway. Fargo stepped around them and crouched low to fast-peek inside the kitchen.

Little Richard stood at the stove, turning steaks in skillets. He glanced down at Fargo and said, "Something wrong with you, mister?"

Fargo raised and gestured for the women to come on. He had them wait at the foot of the stairs while he got Marvin. Pulling the man away from the bar by his belt, Fargo said, "Marvin, you let one get by."

"One what?" Marvin grunted.

"Never mind. Come on. It's time to stand guard again."

They followed the women to Irene's room. "Don't open that door," Fargo warned when Camille started to. He turned the knob, flung the door open, and slipped around its edge with his Colt swinging left to right at chest level. He saw nothing amiss, but went to check the

other side of the bed anyhow, then looked under it to be doubly sure. Holstering the Colt, he said, "It's safe, ladies. Step inside. Hurry."

He closed the door behind them. "Okay, they have us spotted. In a way that's good. I had just as soon put an end to this here in Joe Gilly's saloon as anyplace. Marvin's outside your door. I'll be downstairs. They'll have to get by me first. I'm not all that easy to get by. There's no sense staying up worrying about what might happen. My advice is for all of you to get some sleep. We go at daybreak." He turned and opened the door.

Andrée snapped, "Damn you, Mr. Fargo. You're using us as bait."

He nodded and stepped through the doorway. After hearing the latch slam down in place, he told Marvin, "Keep your eyes open, Marvin. The bad guys are close by. What are those young wranglers' names you were with at the bar?"

"Uh, one's Davey. 'Tuther's name is Peevy."

Fargo went down to them and said, "Men, I need you to do me a big favor. There's a few drinks in it if you will."

Davey said, "Sure. What's the favor?"

"I have to go stable our horses. I'm expecting trouble, not at the stable, but here. I'd like for you to stand at the foot of the stairs and stop anybody wearing a duster or a white gown from going up them."

Peevy wasn't sure he heard right. He cocked his head and squinted one eye at Fargo as he said, "Lemme get this straight. You did say duster or gown?"

"White gown. The kind worn by Arabs."

Peevy opened the eye and looked at Davey. "You know what he means, Davey? A-rab?"

Fargo answered first. "You see anybody in a white gown you stop him if you have to shoot him in the leg to do it. Same goes for anybody wearing a duster."

They nodded, but it was clear to Fargo they were unsure. They picked up their beers and headed for the stairs. Fargo headed for the horses, which were hitched out front of the stage office. He took them to the livery, where a boy of about twelve met him.

"Yes, sir, can I help you?" the lad asked.

"Need to stable these horses for the night."

"That sure is a magnificent black-and-white stallion you have there, mister."

Fargo nodded. "I want them fed and watered too."

"You want 'em stalled or tied to rungs at the back of the barn? What in the world kind of horses are them other three, anyhow. I ain't never seen anything like them."

"They are desert horses. Fine animals. Put them in stalls."

The youngster showed him the way to four stalls and helped Fargo strip the horses. As they worked, Fargo asked, "Laddie, how long will you be here tonight?"

"Mister, I sleep here." He pointed to a pile of hay in a back corner. "I'll be here all night. Why?"

"Somebody might come by to check on my horses. They might even try to hurt them."

The boy whistled under his breath, then said, "Gosh, mister, that would be a terrible thing for somebody to do. I ain't big enough to stop 'em. So, what do you want me to do?"

"Run outside and start yelling loud as you can. Run to the saloon and get me. As a matter of fact, you can start running the instant you see anybody wearing a duster or a white gown."

The kid scratched his head and mused aloud, "A white gown? You mean one of those kinds Arabs wear?"

Fargo winced and looked at him anew. "Yes. But how'd you know that?"

"Mister, I go to school. I saw pictures of 'em in a book we were studying. Geography. I like geography. When I grow up, I'm going to China."

"Here's two dollars to put in the bank for the trip." Fargo dug the money out of his hip pocket and gave it to the boy, then handed him the Sharps, saying, "Keep this out of sight. I don't want you getting shot."

The towheaded kid wasn't at all amused. He suggested, "Mister, I know how to load and fire a Sharps. Do it all the time. My pa taught me how."

Fargo was impressed. "He did, huh?"

"Yes, sir. He rides shotgun on Mr. Simms' stagecoach. Pa knows all about guns, especially rifles."

"Link Johnson's your pa? Why aren't you home with your mother?"

The boy glanced down. "She's dead. Some say Dunk Gunch killed her, only nobody can prove he did. I stay here when Pa's on a run. He's due back in a few days."

Fargo sighed heavily and said, "Your pa's a good man. Sorry about your mother. Look, I have to go now. Give them your best oats and all the water they want. I'll be back at dawn. You take care, young man, and don't forget what I said about keeping the rifle out of sight. I didn't mean you might shoot yourself. If one of those men came in and saw you with it, well . . ."

"Bad, huh?"

"The worst kind." He ruffled the boy's hair and headed out.

Approaching the corner, he saw the Moroccans looking through windows on one side of the saloon, the desperadoes doing the same a short distance down the other side from the double doors.

Fargo stepped out in the middle of the cross streets and drew his Colt.

9

Shooting at any of them was out of the question. A miss could go through a window and wound or kill a person inside the saloon. Fargo wanted them away from the windows, out in the open. He raised his gun hand and fired one shot in the air.

The four men involuntarily ducked and turned to face him. He was already replacing the spent round when the two desperadoes went for their guns.

Fargo dived to the ground and escaped their first shots. He rolled away in time to miss being hit by their next bullets.

The Moroccans and desperadoes ran crouching to the double doors and shoved one another inside.

Fargo scrambled to his feet. As he ran to the saloon's entrance, he looked through the windows. The desperadoes were headed toward the stairs.

Shots were fired inside the saloon.

He rushed through the entrance. Practically all the customers were belly-down on the floor. In one fast scan around the room, he glimpsed a white blur slam shut the door to the kitchen and the two young wranglers sprawled on the lower steps.

He looked up and saw Marvin charging down the walkway like a mad bull.

Wood splintered.

Marvin roared.

Fargo dashed up the stairs. Marvin was tearing his way through an all-but-destroyed door to the front room.

Glass shattered. A shot was fired inside the room. The

slug came through the broken door and buried in the wall on Fargo's left.

Marvin yelled, "C'mere, you sonsabitches!" More glass shattered.

Fargo glanced at the women's door. It was closed. He ran back down the stairs, out of the saloon, and into the street.

Marvin's big head was poking out of the broken window. He shouted down to Fargo, "They're over there." He nodded at a building on the cross street. "Behind it!"

"Stay there," Fargo shouted. He ran to the corner of the building, looked at Marvin, and yelled, "Do you see them?"

"Naw, but that's where they went. Be careful."

Fargo squatted and peered around the corner. It was pitch-black back there. He stood and looked down the street in hope of seeing the Moroccans. They too had vanished in the darkness. He went back inside the saloon.

The customers had gotten up and formed into clusters. They stopped talking when Fargo entered. He moved to the young cowpunchers lying on the stairs. Grimacing from the painful gunshot wound in his left thigh, Peevy apologized to Fargo. "One was faster than me. I'm sorry, mister."

"Don't be," Fargo replied. He winked at Davey, who was tying his neckerchief around his upper left arm. "You okay, kid?"

"Yeah," Davey answered. "Just a crease, but it burns like a branding iron must. I'll be all right. You want us to stay here in case they come back?"

Fargo said, "No. We better get your partner to the doctor."

The words were barely out when a fat man gripping a black satchel entered the saloon. In a loud voice he said, "I heard shots. Do you need me, or the undertaker?"

"Over here," Fargo said.

The stubby-legged doctor took short steps getting to him. Looking at the two wounded cowpokes, he pulled his medical bag open and said, "Looks to me like both of you are damn lucky." He removed a small bottle filled with dark liquid from the bag. "Grit your teeth," he told

Peevy. "This stuff burns like all hell." He told Fargo to rip open the shirt sleeve so he could see what the wound looked like.

Peevy groaned when the doctor wiped some of the fluid on the gash.

The doc grunted, "You'll live." He turned his attention to Davey and told him to loosen his gun belt and pull his britches down.

Davey said, "With all these people watching? Nosiree, I won't do it."

Fargo restrained Davey while two men got the wound exposed.

Doc said, "It missed the bone." He felt around the thigh. "Came out over here clean as a pin. You'll limp around for a couple of weeks, but you'll live, too. Somebody hand me a bottle of whiskey."

Four men held out bottles for him to take. He grabbed the closest and sloshed whiskey on both holes, then guzzled down the rest. Smacking his chubby lips, he looked at the empty bottle and said, "Not bad. Not bad at all. Joe finally got some of the better stuff." He closed his bag and stood before saying to Davey, "Son, my advice is that you stay off that leg for a few days. And, goddammit, don't pick at the crust when it starts healing up. Do, and you'll get it infected sure as hell." He glanced at Fargo, started to speak, changed his mind, and went to the bar instead.

Fargo motioned for the fleshy saloon girl to come to him.

"Whatcha want?" she asked.

"This man needs a bed. Yours will do. Help me get him up the stairs."

Davey objected first. "Aw, mister, I don't need no bed. My boss, Mr. Marcum, needs me. We start branding tomorrow."

Fleshy was quick to add, "I'm not screwing anybody with him lying there."

"Well, he has to get on somebody's bed for a few days," Fargo muttered.

"Let him use Joe's," Fleshy replied.

They carried Davey upstairs and stretched him out on

Joe Gilly's big bed in his quarters at the back of the walkway. Fleshy patted his good leg and promised, "I'll look in on you now and then. Little Richard will be glad to put some weight on you."

Back downstairs Fargo had a few drinks at the bar, then sat to play draw poker with two well-dressed men and a pair of ranchhands. He learned right off he was in a game with four sharp poker players. The ranchhand on his left bluffed with an ace high and beat Fargo's pair of nines. Fargo settled down to serious playing after that.

An hour later the ranchhand across the table from Fargo dropped out. A slim fellow with gray temples and a nice coat and string tie took his place. A large diamond ring encircled the third finger on his right hand. Fargo noticed his fingernails were clean as a hound's tooth, and highly polished. And he wore a black leather gun belt with a Smith & Wesson in the holster.

Slim won the next hand with two pair. Then the game seesawed among the five players, none winning two in a row through the five shuffles and deals. While Fargo was shuffling, he saw the players across the table looking at him nervously. He was about to ask what was going on when he realized they weren't looking at him but at somebody behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Camille standing there. He didn't acknowledge her. He dealt.

A couple of deals later Slim called over to the bartender and asked for a new deck. "These cards are limp as rags," he said, and ripped the deck in two.

The bartender brought him a new deck and took drink orders.

Slim fanned the cards on the table, removed the jokers, then moved a fingertip over the cards slowly so everybody would see all the cards were there. He handed them to the player on his right. The fellow shuffled and offered the deck to Slim to cut. Slim shoved the cards to cut them. About half the deck moved back a tad. He laid the block of cards on the table. The dealer put the bottom block on it and started dealing.

Slim won with a pair of aces.

Fargo heard Camille sigh, then watched her go on the

stage and interrupt Irene's yodeling. The two females communicated with hand gestures interspersed with Spanish, glancing at the poker table occasionally. Fargo deduced Camille's actions had something to do with the poker game.

Irene stepped to the front of the stage, bent, and spoke to her gathering. Fargo couldn't hear what she said, but he saw the men nod. Irene looked at Camille and nodded.

Camille started singing a cappella—in French, of course. As she did, she moved about the stage in an animated manner, conveying to Fargo, at least, that she had done this before. The lady was good. Her small audience seemed captivated. After a few stanzas the piano player picked up on the tune and accompanied her. At the end of the piece Camille dazzled everybody watching by leaping high and coming down on the platform in a perfect split. Not only did the crowd applaud and cheer the shapely nun, they showered her with money.

She brought it with her to the table and stood waiting for a seat. After a few losing hands the cowpoke on Fargo's left quit playing. Camille settled down in the vacant chair, put her bankroll on the table in front of her, and nodded that she was ready. A crowd collected behind her to watch and see if this nun knew how to play draw.

Slim shove-cut the deck as usual. The man on his right dealt. Fargo caught four hearts and a club, Camille a king-high nothing.

The man on Camille's right opened with a pair of jacks.

Everybody called.

Slim took three cards and Fargo discarded the club.

Camille started to discard three cards, then pulled them back and held. The men watching immediately became restless.

The man who opened took three cards.

Dealer took three cards.

Opener passed. So did the dealer.

Slim bet twenty dollars.

Fargo squeezed his cards to see what he caught. A black trey peeked out at him. He folded.

Camille called and raised fifty. The men behind her exchanged glances. Several shook their heads.

Opener showed his pair of jacks, then folded.

Dealer folded.

Slim called her fifty and upped it by fifty.

Camille had enough cash left to cover half of it. Fargo shoved twenty-five over to her. She added it to the pot and spread her cards faceup on the table.

Fargo groaned right along with everybody else.

Slim turned over three aces, a six, and a ten. When he reached to drag the pot, Camille's right hand shot out and grabbed his wrist.

In Spanish she told Fargo, "He cheated. Make him let you examine the aces. One or all will feel different than his other cards."

Slim looked at him and began a protest. "What'd she say? What's wrong? I won fair and square. Nun or not, I'm not giving her money back. She shouldn't be in this game if she doesn't know how to play." He started to pull the pot to him.

Fargo grabbed his hands and said, "Just a minute, mister. I want to look at your cards."

Slim said disgustedly, "Jesus Christ, what next? Shit, let her have her money back, then tell her to leave the table."

"After I look at those cards," Fargo said dryly. He picked up the aces and felt both sides of them, then did the same to the six.

The man who opened asked, "What's going on, mister?"

"Yeah," Slim echoed. "I'm getting tired of this shit."

A bystander spoke up. "Something wrong with those cards, mister?"

Fargo said, "Sure is. These aces are slicker than the six."

Camille told him why. She assembled and shuffled the deck, then put it in front of Fargo to cut. He duplicated Slim's fancy shove-cut, then took the top card off the bottom block, the very first card that would be dealt, and slowly turned it over. All eyes cut to Slim when they saw the ace.

Slim rose with his gun drawn. Before he could bring it

up to fire, several pair of hands grabbed him and knocked the revolver to the floor. Somebody shouted, "Drag that cheating son of a bitch out of here and haul him to—"

Another voice interrupted to finish the sentence, "To the hanging tree."

A third voice said, "I'll get the rope."

Slim struggled to get out of their grasp, but it was no use. Seconds later they had him out of the saloon and headed up the street.

Fargo asked Camille, "How did you know? How did he get those aces slickened without any of us seeing him do it?"

Camille said, "My father was a gambler, probably the best poker player in France. By the time I was twelve he had showed me all the ways to cheat and how to catch somebody else cheating. The man had a confederate. They applied a very thin coat of wax to the aces. Invisible. Extremely difficult to feel. When the cards are cut by shoving, they will break right above an ace. Who provided this particular deck?"

Fargo turned to look at the bartender. The man was staring straight at him, sweat running down his face. When Fargo took a step toward him, the man ran out of the saloon.

Fargo nudged Camille and suggested they get some shut-eye. "Dawn comes early," he said. "We have a hard day's ride ahead of us tomorrow."

They went to the room and spread their bedrolls. Monique was already in hers, Andrée under the sheets on the whore's bed. Camille stripped and looked at him and whispered, "Not tonight, big man. I wanted you to see what you'll get later, somewhere on the trail."

With that promise in mind, Fargo blew out the lamp, and they slept apart on the floor.

Later, a movement outside the door snapped Fargo's eyes open. His right hand gripped the Colt as he listened to snoring outside the door. Awake now, he pulled on his clothes and opened the door. Marvin lay sprawled faceup on the walkway, his mouth wide open, snoring loudly. Dawn's first light coming through the windows below put a dull gray cast on the saloon's interior. Ex-

cept for Marvin's raucous sounds, all was quiet. Fargo stepped back inside the room and lit the lamp.

Andrée lay on her side facing him. She looked at him questioningly. He said, "We go, ma'am. Have Marvin bring down the bedrolls."

He stepped over Marvin and went down to the bar. Except for two passed-out cowpunchers draped over poker tables, the room was deserted. Fargo filled a glass with bourbon, then sat to drink it while he waited for the women.

Within moments he heard their soft footfalls on the walkway above. They came down carrying the bedrolls. Marvin wasn't with them. Fargo stood and took the bedding from them. He stopped at the doors and looked out onto the street.

Three men, one with a heavily bandaged left shoulder, came toward the saloon, walking side by side in the middle of the street that led to the livery. Their gun belts hung low on their right thighs, the fingers of their gun hands touching the grips of their weapons.

Fargo dropped the bedrolls, drew his Colt, and muttered to the women, "All right, ladies, it's showdown time in Waco. Please hunker behind the bar and stay out of the way till it's over."

As he spoke, the trio spread apart and halted to face him just before they entered the intersection.

Directly across from the saloon entrance was a café. On the corner to Fargo's left stood a long, low general store, and on the other was a small bank.

A duster-clad man stepped from between the bank and the barber shop next to the stage line's office.

His partner emerged from the corner of the saloon where the stairs were. He joined the man with the shoulder wound.

One of the Moroccans stepped from the far edge of the café and took a stance in the street. Fargo noticed he'd armed himself during the night. The man held a Colt.

So did his partner, who came from between the rear of the general store and a big feed store.

Andrée gasped, "My God, Mr. Fargo, there's seven of them."

"Even odds, ma'am," he muttered.

Monique lamented, "You'll be killed."

Fargo replied wryly, "Oh, ye of little faith. Now, ladies, get behind the bar."

Marvin clambered down the stairs and looked out over Fargo's shoulder. "Shit," he whispered, "what can I do to help?"

"There's an Arab in the street over by the general store. Think you can worry him long enough for me to thin out some of the others?"

"Mister, don't even bother looking at that A-rab. I'll get the sissified bastard." He headed for the kitchen and the back door.

Camille appeared at Fargo's side. She held a five-shot, single-action Remington-Beals pocket revolver that had a brass trigger guard. She said, "I'll help."

He said, "No, you won't. This is man's work. Where'd you get that gun? Hand it to me."

Camille said, "Off that drunk cowboy over there. It was sticking out of his pocket." She handed the revolver to him.

He checked and found it empty of ammunition. "Put it back in his pocket, then do what I said."

Andrée said, "Leave him alone, Camille. Get over here with Monique and me."

Fargo considered the gunmen again. As he did, the man standing in the middle of the threesome called out to him. "You son of a bitch, you coming out or do we have to come in after you? Either way you're a dead man."

Fargo reckoned he was Dunk Gunch. He answered, "Dunk, if I miss all the rest, I will shoot you in the heart the instant you try to draw down on me. Before I do, why don't you confess you murdered Mrs. Johnson."

Dunk's loud laugh changed to a snarl as he replied, "Sure, I killed her. Cut her throat wide open after doing the same to her sloppy pussy with my dick. You wanna make something out of—"

He never got the time to utter the last word. The Sharps barked behind him. The bullet entered the back of Dunk's head. When it came out, it took a hunk of his face with it.

Before Dunk's dead body hit the ground, Marvin dashed roaring at the Moroccan, and Fargo had pushed through the double doors, swinging the Colt from left to right, squeezing the trigger as his aim crossed each of the five targets. He missed the Moroccan at the café because the fellow fell back in time, but he left Sam, Horace, and the two duster-wearers lying in puddles of blood.

He jerked his head around when he heard the Moroccan at the general store scream loudly. Marvin was in the process of breaking the slim man's back.

Fargo stepped out into the cross streets and saw the Johnson boy coming toward him, carrying the Sharps easylike, as though he were hunting jackrabbits and would give one a fighting chance before he dropped it on the run.

The boy went straight to Dunk's body and rolled it faceup with a foot. Then he spit in the bloody remainder of the face and said, "Burn in hell, you no-good bastard."

Fargo pulled the boy close to him. The lad dropped the Sharps and clutched the big man around the waist, buried his face in his lower chest, and sobbed. The Trailsman looked blankly toward the town's church as he ruffled the youngster's hair.

A pair of jaybirds flew above the thin veil of gunsmoke that hung low in front of the saloon. Roosters on opposite ends of town exchanged greetings, and a mockingbird did high jinks from its perch on top of the hanging tree between the café and jail. The first rays of the morning sun struck Slim's lifeless body dangling on the end of the rope.

The Moroccan had gotten away.

10

They rode north out of Waco and stayed on the trail to Fort Worth. The sole surviving Moroccan followed at more than a discreet distance. The swarthy fellow never drifted off the road, never closed on the foursome. Neither did he fall back. When Fargo and the women stopped to rest their horses, the Moroccan halted. Fargo concluded that Achmid, now alone, had no desire to test them out on the open prairie. He'd done it with much strength before and lost. No, Achmid would bide his time and wait for the bustle of town, where there were many dark places in which to lurk, many corners to hide around, many roofs to leap from. The Moroccan preferred the surprise attack to frontal confrontation.

Before noon Fargo left the women twice and rode to the top of nearby hills, within sight of the women and Moroccan, to see if the Comanches were around. All he saw was the endless rolling prairie and a wide swath of beaten-down grass that stretched from the southern horizon to the northern—the unmistakable sign that drovers were taking cattle to market.

In midafternoon they rode on a relatively flat expanse of the prairie. Fargo left the women again and went to the cattle trail. He dismounted and checked a chip. It was moist beneath the thin crust. Fargo looked north but didn't see them. However, he knew they were close. The Trailsman waved for the women to join him, mounted up, and rode in the middle of the swath.

They galloped to intercept him. He pointed at several chips and told them, "Cattle. They're just over the hori-

zon. With luck, maybe the trail boss will invite us to eat at the chuck wagon with the drovers."

Andrée stared north and asked, "How far, Mr. Fargo, to Cowtown?"

"Should be there by sundown tomorrow."

"Will we stop for the night?" Camille asked, a tinge of hope in her tone.

Fargo nodded.

Andrée snapped, "Why stop? We could be there by noon tomorrow. We want to continue on, Mr. Fargo. You can rest after we get to Cowtown."

"No," he sighed, "we're stopping at sunset. We'll spend the night at the drovers' camp. Achmid, or whoever he is back there, wouldn't dare come anywhere near their camp. While I see pretty damn good at night, I'd rather keep an eye on him in the daylight. But if you want to risk avoiding him and the Comanche during a night ride, then you're free to try."

Camille gasped, "Comanche?"

Monique gulped out, "I'm staying with Fargo. I don't want Achmid touching me. Don't be a fool, Andrée. Forget about riding on. A half-day won't make any difference. If he's there, he will—"

Andrée's scowl interrupted her. She hissed angrily, "Shut up, Monique."

Cowed, Monique slowed her bay and dropped back, out of the haughty woman's sight.

Half an hour passed before Andrée broke the heavy silence. "We stop for the night, Mr. Fargo."

Fargo wondered if the thought of Achmid or of the Comanche had changed her mind. He decided it was Achmid. She hadn't displayed any real fear of the Comanche at the McCurdy ranch. He nodded and muttered, "Good decision, ma'am."

Their shadows rode in front of them as they topped a low rise and saw the herd of longhorns strung out in a long line. A column of white smoke rising well in front of the herd promised an evening meal.

The two young Mexican men riding drag jerked upright in their saddles when they finally saw Fargo and the women. Fargo waved to them, and one waved back. The

youngster wrangling the remuda of about twenty horses angled over and came alongside Fargo. The sweaty boy—Fargo guessed he might be twelve—spit a stream of tobacco juice, then smiled and said, "Howdy, mister." Touching the brim of his dusty hat, he nodded to the women.

Fargo asked, "Mind if we ride along with you for a spell?" He extended his right hand out to the boy and said, "Name's Skye Fargo."

The youngster had a firm grip. He replied, "Glad to meetcha, Mr. Fargo. My name's Les Tilden. My dad, John, is trail boss." He nodded toward the front of the herd. "I'm sure he won't mind." Les glanced at the women and asked, "How come they're dressed up like that?" Then he expressed a thought, "I've never seen clothes like that before."

"They're nuns, French nuns. I'm escorting them to Cowtown. Where are you taking this herd? It doesn't look very big."

"Started out with five hundred head. Lost a few so far. We're taking them to St. Joe. Nuns, huh? Don't reckon I ever heard of them before. What do they do?"

"Well, Les, when I find out, I'll tell you. See you at the chuck wagon. Don't eat too much dust." Fargo shot him a wink and spurred the Ovaro to a trot.

He moved past the flank man, a young black, the man riding swing, then the point rider, another young Mexican, and came alongside John Tilden. John had seen him coming and had a hand ready for Fargo to grasp. Shaking hands, Tilden said, "Guess my boy already told you my name. How's Les doing? This is his first time droving."

"He's doing just fine, John. A mite dusty, but that goes with the job. My name's Skye Fargo. The sisters and I are on our way to Cowtown. After seeing your trail, I thought we'd spend the night in your camp, if you don't mind. There's an Arab tracking us, and I know there's Comanche in the area. Either one could give us trouble."

John turned and looked to the rear. "That him way the hell back there? Man dressed in white?"

Fargo nodded. "He's a mean sort. But he won't come

anywhere near where you camp. It's the Comanche I'm concerned about. Have you had any trouble with them?"

"No, but that doesn't mean we won't. The closer we get to Baxter Springs Trail, the more we have to watch out for them. You said you knew they were near. You've seen them?"

"A few times, beginning at the Rocking M. And they raided the way station between San Antone and Waco. That tells me they're moving north."

"They hit Lucas McCurdy's place? Damn, I tried talking Lucas into waiting till I had my herd ready to go, then we could head to market together. What happened? Does he have anything left?"

"Not much. They took his wife and daughter."

"Jesus," John mumbled, "that's terrible."

Fargo told him everything that had happened at the ranch.

Tilden sighed and said, "Well, you can't be blamed for those red savages showing up 'cause you didn't know about them, but these nuns sure as hell can be. Lucas, he isn't going to take kindly to them bringing all this down on him."

"No, I'm as much responsible as they, John. While I couldn't prevent what happened, I aim to make things right. Soon as I get rid of these women, I'm going to find Opal and her daughter and take them home. I'll do that or die in the trying."

Tilden looked at him and said, "Mister, you got guts big as St. Louis to even think about riding into Comanche country. I'm surprised those savages didn't skin you alive when they had you. Lucas will be mad as hell, all right, but he wouldn't expect you to go after them. I know I wouldn't."

"I have to," Fargo replied.

Nothing more was said until they neared the chuck wagon. Tilden told him to ride on in, that he'd be along soon as he got the herd settled down for the night.

The gentle north breeze that caressed Fargo's face carried the unmistakable aroma of Sonofabitch Stew. Fargo was ready for a bowl of it.

An older man, full-bearded and wearing a sugarloaf

sombrero that, like all his other clothes, had long since seen better days, glanced up from the black kettle he was tending and squinted one eye suspiciously at Fargo. "Who're you?" he asked. "Whaddaya want? Tilden didn't tell me 'bout having any extras."

Fargo dismounted and told the women to do the same. He walked to the fire, squatted, and inhaled deeply of the bubbling stew before saying, "Old-timer, that's the absolute best-smelling Sonofabitch Stew I've had the honor of passing judgment on since I came to Texas." He held his right hand out. The cook gripped it cautiously, suspicion still in his eyes. Fargo said, "Name's Fargo. The nuns don't speak English, but I bet they'll love your fixings. John told us to come on in. You're stuck with us through the morning meal."

The old man relaxed his squint and grunted. "Wal, if John said it was okay . . . Smells good, huh? What'd you say your name was? Mine's McGuffey. They call me Mac. You got a good sniffer to know this is Sonofabitch."

"Fargo's the name. Need any help, Mac?"

Mac visibly tensed. "Hell, no. Two cooks and one pot don't mix. I'll take care of it all by myself, like I always do. You can take care of your horses and those funny-dressed females. Tell 'em to stay away till I say it's time to eat." Stirring the stew, he muttered under his breath, " 'Need any help, Mac?' My Gawd."

Fargo told the women to bring their horses along, and led them to a stand of mesquite. Tethering the pinto to the trunk of one, he cautioned the women not to go near the cook, or the old man might hit them if they did.

Camille's interest lay elsewhere. She asked, "Where do you want me to put my bedroll?"

He looked over his stallion at her. She smiled sensuously and licked her lips. He knew tonight would be the night, and he wondered if she'd let him get any rest. He told her, "Anyplace you want. I'm spreading mine out in the open over there where I can see the moon and stars." He nodded toward a flat spot that gave an unobstructed view skyward.

Camille set her bedding in the middle of the area he indicated. So did Monique, but Andrée took hers to the

far side of the mesquite. Camille pulled Monique aside and talked in French to her. Monique glanced at Fargo, then moved her bedroll near Andrée's.

After taking the saddles off their mounts, they sat and watched the drovers finish their work. John Tilden led the tired men to the chuck wagon, dismounted, and beat dust from his clothing with his hat. His son found a grassy spot and collapsed onto it, his arms and legs extended wide. Fargo knew food wasn't very high on the youngster's list of priorities. The other cowboys looked at the strangers only briefly to satisfy their curiosity before stretching out on the ground also.

"Damn hard work," Fargo muttered, "for fifty dollars."

The sun sat on the horizon when Mac shouted, "Come and git it!"

Nobody moved for a good five minutes. John pulled his son erect and aimed him at the fire. The boy staggered to it and stopped to stand on wobbling legs. Mac handed him a bowl of stew and warned, "Don't drop it, boy. That's all you git."

One by one the others pushed to their feet and went to the cook. Fargo and the women went last. Andrée and the other two women took their bowls back to the edge of the mesquite to eat. Fargo sat among the young cowboys. One introduced himself as Pecos and said, "If you don't mind my asking, mister, where are you from? I ain't never seen a hat like yours."

Thus began what turned out to be more than an hour of Fargo's describing forests and mountains, streams and waterfalls, critters large and small, none of which any of the cowboys had ever seen, but were curious to hear more about. Even Mac hunkered down to hear about Fargo's travels.

Fargo told how he killed a grizzly bear by leading it to the edge of a tall cliff, then inciting it to charge. At the last second he said he dodged away and the bear fell to its death.

Pecos jumped in to go Fargo one better. "I got bears like that too, till I found a better way." Most in the crowd spit on the ground between their feet, but only the Tilden boy cocked his head and squinted doubtfully at

Pecos as he continued. "I busted a little branch off a mesquite and switched that grizzly to death."

After a moment of silence and considerable spitting, one of the Mexicans Fargo had seen riding drag cleared his throat and said, "I used those switches for a while, till one broke when the grizzly was charging."

When he paused, Les Tilden sat erect, and gulped, "Holy cow, Pablo, wh-what'd you do?"

Pablo sniffed and went on, "Made that bear mad as hell, that's what. When it opened its mouth real wide to eat me, I shoved my hand in it all the way to its tail, then turned that grizzly wrong side out."

There was a moment of forced silence before most of the young men burst out laughing.

Les scrambled to his feet and leapt on Pablo. "Dang you, Pablo, you tricked me again." He punched Pablo on the arm.

John Tilden rose and said, "Okay, men, time to get some shut-eye. Dusty, you relieve Carl at ten. Fallon will relieve you at midnight." He nodded good night to Fargo and headed for his bedroll.

The Trailsman stood and scanned the heavens as he ambled to his bedding. A coyote atop a hillock beyond the resting cattle commenced howling at the full moon that hung high in the star-filled sky. He looked down on Camille's head and bare shoulders.

She was wide awake, waiting for him. She watched him strip. When he drew his underdrawers down to take them off, she moaned and got out of her bedroll. "Hurry," she whispered, "then come with me."

She led him to a patch of Indian blankets nearby and motioned him to sit. He did, and she stepped to the edge of the patch. After smiling at him, she arched her back and held her arms straight out at her sides. Tilting her head back, she turned around slowly so he could see her from every angle.

Camille's breasts were slightly larger than Monique's and appeared just as firm. Her belly was as flat too. The main difference showed in the width of their hips; Camille's were a tad wider and her buttock cheeks a little rounder. Camille had the larger, bushier V of pubic hair. It glis-

tened blue-black in the bright moonlight, as did her long tresses. Completing the provocative turnaround, she arched an eyebrow, as though asking if he approved of what he'd seen. When he nodded, she smiled and cupped her breasts and squeezed them.

She came to him with the nipples protruding between fingers and offered one to his lips. He accepted the nipple eagerly, pulled her by the waist to him, and sucked in most of the pillowy mound.

Camille murmured, "Oh, that feels so good. It's been so long for me. Suck harder, lick my nipples. Oh, God, yes, lick me all over."

She lay back, pulling him down with her. He ran a hand down over her stomach and teased her V. Her breathing quickened. Her back arched and she started writhing.

Fargo slipped a middle finger down the begging lower lips, parted them, and rubbed up and down on the tender, moist membrane.

Camille moaned, "Harder, big man . . . oh, God, more, please. Higher . . . a little higher. That's it, that's it. Oh, God, that feels good."

He dipped the finger into the opening and circled it as he moved to the other nipple. She reached down and guided his probing finger with her hand. He felt her middle finger join his. While he circled one way, she went the other, gasping, "Oh, oh, oh . . . yes, yes . . . so good."

Fargo kissed above her breasts, up her throat, and met her open mouth. Their tongues caressed, probed, circled, and explored. She was hot, breathless, mewing little child-like sounds, and squirming, twisting energetically. He broke the passionate wet kiss and withdrew his fingers from the slickened sheath.

Camille knew what to do, what she wanted. Her legs parted and her feet came up and she hooked her heels on his shoulders. Her crotch raised and the hot juicy lips parted to capture him. He touched his blood-swollen summit to the eager slit, then grasped her buttock cheeks, and pulled and shoved. She gasped throughout the slow,

deep penetration. "Unngh . . . aaagh, oh me . . . ahhh, oh, God . . . oh, God."

He paused deep inside her to briefly relish the hotness. She whimpered, "Romp me, big man . . . give it to me, please." He started thrusting power strokes. She moaned joyously and met him hard on each downward plunge, stayed in perfect rhythm with his every move. When he rotated and rocked his hips, she heightened their pleasure by moving hers in reverse. Within seconds they were bathed in sweat and breathing hard.

Her legs lowered to his waist and she dug her heels into his buttock cheeks. Her hands clutched his muscled back. She pinched and she scratched uncontrollably, whimpering, "Deeper, big man . . . and harder, faster! Oh, God, yes, go faster. That's it . . . oh, oh, oh, more! Please, big man, give me more, more . . . oh, me."

When he started jerking, swelling, in prelude to erupting, she begged, "No, not yet. Wait for me . . . please wait for me." Her hips swiveled with renewed vigor. Her legs dropped to the ground. She bent her knees, put her feet on the ground, and thrust her hips up and started bucking on his throbbing hardness to make it glide in and out high on the wet, hot charm. As she did, he felt her inner membrane clasp tightly around him, relax, then go wild, seeming to have a frenzied mind of its own.

He exploded in mighty spurts. With the first one, she gasped between gritted teeth, "Aaaayeeeiii! Oh, God, big man, don't quit! Oh, that's so good, so wonderful. Make it last, make it last forever." He felt her shudder, heard her start gulping. She murmured, "So beautiful . . . I'm so happy."

Unable to keep the fierce pace any longer, her arms dropped to the ground and she parted her long slim legs and lowered them onto the Indian blankets also. He remained atop her while he softened, then rolled off and lay beside her.

After catching her breath, she nuzzled his throat, nibbled his left ear, and kissed his eyes, nose, then tenderly on the lips. With her head in the crook of his shoulder and looking up, she whispered, "God, this is so romantic. Me with a big beautiful man who knows how to give

a woman much pleasure. Lying on a bed of pretty flowers out in a prairie. Looking up at the moon and stars . . . Oh, God, what more could a woman want? I may never be the same again. I know I'll never have it like this again."

She kissed him hungrily, gratefully, and he caressed her tenderly, happy to have shared the moment with the dark-haired Frenchwoman who clearly knew how to make love.

They lay still and quiet for a long time, each looking at the heavens, thinking their own thoughts. A star fell.

She whispered, "Did you make a wish?"

"Sort of. I was wishing I knew what to expect when we get to Cowtown. You want to enlighten me?"

Without hesitation she muttered, "Oh, God knows I want to, but I can't. Please, Fargo, don't press me to discuss it. You will know soon enough."

"I wish I could believe you, Camille, but for some unknown reason—a gut feeling, I suppose—I don't. Not that my knowing really matters. Once I get you ladies to Cowtown, my promise to Jeansonne is fulfilled. Whatever you women are up to won't involve me, because I'll be gone."

She kneeled instantly and gasped, "You'd leave us? Before we—" She trapped the rest of the unfinished statement, and began again. "Fargo, you can't leave us right away. We need you."

His squint of doubt brought her to her feet. He watched her pace around him, searching the sky for what he supposed were words to mollify him, make him change his mind about a hasty departure. Finally she dropped to her knees and said, "Oh, hell, I guess I might as well tell you. Some of it at least. Please don't ask for any more than I tell you. Promise?"

"No, Camille, I won't promise. I might not like what I hear. Most of the time part of a story is dangerous. Is there danger in what you all are doing? I think so. The Moroccans, for example. But they're only part of it. The other part waits in Cowtown. Right, Camille?"

"Yes," she admitted. "A man is to meet us. We have never met him. We don't know what he will do. That's

why you must stay with us. After we meet with him . . . Oh, God, why am I telling you this? Why me? Why not one of the others? Fargo, please don't ask me to say more. Please don't. I've said more than I should have. Be content that it's only one man."

"That's not good enough, sweetie. Who is he? Where's he from? What is he? What does he want from you? Jeansonne mentioned a secret. Is it information you're passing to this man? If I'm to be your protector, I need to know all about this man."

"I don't know his name," she pled. "None of us does. Only Jean-Pierre knew his name. All we know is that he is a chubby man and will be wearing a red vest and a matching bowler. And, yes, we are to give him a secret. Are you satisfied now? Isn't that enough?"

"No, not quite. But I believe you, none of you, know his name. Maybe you should. Jeansonne told me just before he died. If I told you the man's name, if I shared that tidbit with you, would it mean anything? Would you agree to pursue this conversation all the way to my complete satisfaction?"

"Jean-Pierre told you?" Camille was genuinely surprised.

Fargo nodded.

She studied her fingers a moment, deep in thought. Finally she looked at him and said, "No, my knowing his name wouldn't make any difference. However, I admit I'm curious to hear it."

"Al Cazara," he said evenly.

Camille gasped loudly. Her hands came to her mouth. Her eyes widened. The woman acted terrified. She bolted to her feet and ran to her bedroll.

Fargo sat and watched her take her bedding to where the others lay sleeping. She awakened them. They sat up and looked his way. He knew they were discussing his and Camille's conversation. He waited for them to retire, then crawled into his bedroll. He drifted to sleep listening to a coyote howling at the moon.

His inner timepiece awakened him shortly before dawn broke over the prairie. He lay looking at the morning star, which dominated the eastern quadrant of the awakening sky. The wrangler watching over the herd was

strumming his guitar softly and singing "Little Joe the Wrangler" just as softly. The herd was obviously jittery; otherwise the soothing lullaby wouldn't be needed at this hour.

Fargo also listened to Mac move about at his chuck wagon. The glow from his morning cooking fire played on the mesquite near where Fargo lay.

The young cowboy was singing the third stanza, "When the cattle stampeded, like a hail," when the icy word ceased abruptly. The guitar strings twanged unusually loud, harshly, then fell deathly silent just as suddenly.

A bolt of absolute alarm raced through Fargo's body and jarred him upright. He jerked his head around to face the cowboy. In that instant, it happened in a flash. At the same time Fargo saw the wrangler was doubled over, an arrow protruding from his back, the restless herd came up from where it rested on the ground, and mounted savages raced in.

Mac heard them too. He sounded the alarm. As the Comanche stampeded the herd, blankets covering the cowboys flew back. One of the women shrieked. Pulling on his Levi's, Fargo glanced at the women. They were up and dressing. He shouted to them, "Get off the ground. Climb up in the tallest tree you can find."

He swung his gun belt around his hips as he ran to the Ovaro. He released the pinto's hitch, leapt onto it bareback, and tore out after the Comanche stampeding the herd. John Tilden and two of his men swung in behind the stallion. Along with Fargo, they started shooting at the savages. Fargo dropped two, the others two more.

The panicked longhorns instantly kicked up a cloud of dust and dirt, making it virtually impossible to see targets in the dim morning light. Fargo swerved right, cleared the veiling cloud, and found a half-naked Comanche. He shot the savage off his pony with one bullet. As he started reloading, a Comanche broke out of the roiling dust cloud and charged him. Fargo reined the Ovaro hard left in the nick of time to prevent a collision, then came around alongside the Indian and knocked him off his pony with the Colt.

The Comanche turned the herd toward the camp. Til-

den's men struggled to turn it away, but failed. Fargo saw the chuck wagon topple. Longhorns were dangerously close to the mesquite. Through the thundering sound of the stampeding herd he heard the women screaming for him to come save them. He shot another Comanche from his mount.

He glanced behind him and saw the Indians had successfully cut several steers out of the herd. Fargo wheeled the stallion and went after them. Les Tilden appeared literally out of nowhere. Compared to his size, the pistol he held seemed big as a cannon. The kid looked mad as hell. Fargo yelled to him, "You go right. I'll cut left. Make every shot count."

Les nodded and reined his horse to the right.

Fargo swung left and dug his heels into the pinto's flanks. As he was taking aim on a savage, he saw a long line of Comanche waiting a short distance beyond his target. Fargo saw something in the row that didn't belong. He looked again, more focused this time. Two of the Indian ponies near the middle of the line carried double riders. In the grasp of one of the Comanche was Opal McCurdy. The other held Pearl.

Pearl spotted the black-and-white stallion. She screamed for Fargo to come get her. The row of savages raised carbines and aimed at him. He veered away as a volley of hot lead screamed past where he would have been. By the time he executed a tight circle, the savages and the longhorns were disappearing fast. He started to chase after them, but reined to a halt when he saw Les Tilden's mount halted and the youngster missing. He scanned the ground behind the horse. Les was on his hands and knees, clutching at his left thigh. Fargo hurried to him and slid off the Ovaro.

Les looked up at him and said, "I got one of the bastards, but one got me too. I gotta get me a better gun when we get to Cowtown."

"Lie down, Les, and let me have a look at your bullet hole."

"Aw, hell, it ain't nothing, Fargo." He tried to stand but collapsed.

Fargo drew his Arkansas toothpick and slit the kid's

breeches leg. He used his neckerchief to wipe away the blood. After inspecting both sides of the leg, he said, "I'm no doc, but if I were, I'd say you'll live. The bullet went clean through the fleshy part. Half-inch more to the right and you'd have gotten a minor crease. I'll help you onto your horse."

On their way to Les' horse, the boy lamented, "My dad is gonna give me hell for getting shot. He told me to stay out of the way, and I didn't do it."

Fargo hoisted him up on the horse and said, "Do what your father said. You think you can stay on that horse? I need to go help round up those steers."

"Yes, sir. You go on. I'll be all right."

Fargo grinned, turned the stallion, and charged off toward the herd.

The cattle had trampled the campsite. The wranglers' bedding lay in shambles. Mac was cursing a blue streak, kicking his overturned chuck wagon, bellowing, "Goddamn Comanche ruined my biscuits."

One of the women started to scream. Fargo snapped his head around and saw the Moroccan reaching up from his saddle, trying to grab Andrée, who was kicking at his hands and trying to gain height in the skimpy tree. Achmid looked at Fargo just as he reined the pinto left to go get him.

The Moroccan broke off his attempt to wrest Andrée from the tree. He fled from the big man. Fargo halted next to the trees and looked at the perched females.

Camille asked, "Can we come down now?"

He nodded. "Yes, but don't wander off. Achmid won't bother you if you stay close to Mac down there. While I'm helping John Tilden, one of you look after his boy. The other two might as well saddle those Arabians and make them ready for the trail. My guess is we've worn out our welcome around here."

He caught up with the cowpunchers. They had calmed the longhorns, which were now grazing in a broad meadow between two long slopes as though nothing had happened. Fargo rode up to John Tilden who said flat out, "Mister, trouble seems to walk in your shadow. I'd be

obliged if you and those nuns would mosey on and leave us be."

While Fargo didn't like hearing it, he did understand John's concern for his cattle and men. He said, "You might as well hear the worst of it, John. Les caught a slug." When Tilden stiffened, Fargo added, "He's worried you'll bawl at him for getting shot. He's got a flesh wound that'll heal, but the Comanche he shot has gone to the Spirit World. You have a tough son, Tilden. My advice is not to fuss at him."

John spat, "You take your advice and get the hell out of here, mister. You've caused Lucas to lose his wife and daughter to those savages, and now you've caused my boy to get shot by them. I don't need your goddamn advice. I need to see your stallion's rump."

Fargo sighed and turned away to go get the women. He couldn't bring back the cattle the Comanche took, he couldn't change places with Les, and he couldn't put Mac's batter back together.

But he was more determined than ever to retrieve the two McCurdy women. That he could do.

11

Shortly before sundown Fargo and the three habit-clad Frenchwomen topped a rise. Before them in the distance sprawled the town of Fort Worth. When the U.S. Army left for good, a town grew up on the site, and the people retained the fort's name. The town became a hub for drovers moving herds to market at St. Joseph. Because of this activity, drovers had given the town the nickname "Cowtown." Fargo headed straight for it. So did Achmid, who rode parallel to them at a great distance.

Coming closer, they saw the town's streets ran east to west and north to south, creating a checkerboard of city blocks. On the outskirts they passed a huge oak, gnarled and as dead as the three men who hung from its larger limbs. The scrawled lettering on a crude sign that leaned against the trunk of the tree read: THEY STOLE HORSES. THEY WENT TO THE DEVIL.

Fargo angled the stallion at the widest street running north to south. It seemed the main one, for much commerce was evident as they traveled most of its full length. Wagons of all kinds—Studebaker farms, Glasswindow deliveries, three-spring grocery wagons—passed them or stood in front of businesses. Cowtown fairly bustled with horsemen and pedestrians.

Fargo halted and asked a shopkeeper where he would find the livery. The fellow, who was sweeping the boardwalk in front of his shop, leaned his broom against the storefront and came out into the street. Facing north, he pointed and said, "Go nearly to the end of Main, then

turn left. It's down a ways, but you'll find it. Randolph's Livery is painted on the sides. Can't miss it."

Fargo touched the brim of his hat. On his way to the cross street, they passed a large two-level house with a white picket fence. The yard was neat and rimmed with beds of colorful flowers. A sign hung from the bottom of the balcony, directly above the steps leading onto the porch, which went the full width of the house: PRIMROSE PATH. Two of the ladies who'd led many a young wrangler down that path waved to Fargo from the balcony.

Next to the bordello was the Four Jacks. Letters painted on the windows stated it was a saloon and dance hall that also offered gambling. Loud piano music spilled out through the wide double doors. A dozen or more horses stood hitched out front.

Directly across from the brothel was the stage line's office. Next to it, facing the Four Jacks was a two-story hotel.

Fargo turned left at the next corner. Randolph's Livery came into view almost immediately. They were greeted by an older man with a mane of white hair and a long white beard severely stained with tobacco juice. After spitting a brown stream, he said, "Welcome, stranger. What can I do for you and these here fine ladies?"

"Need to stable and feed our mounts overnight, old-timer."

"Don't call me that, sonny boy," the old man snapped. "I hate being called that. Name's Homer. Call me Homer. Bring 'em on in and I'll show you where." He waved them inside. Homer stood by and watched them take off the saddles. He said, "Damn fine-looking pinto you have there, mister. Wouldn't want to sell him, would you?"

"Not for sale," Fargo answered for the hundredth or more time. Livery operators were forever asking him that same question. The stallion entered a stall without any encouragement from Fargo.

Fargo and Homer walked outside while the women were finishing with their Arabians. Facing north, Fargo asked, "What's out there, Homer? To me it looks like a whole lot of nothing."

Homer chuckled. "You're right. The river's just below the bluff. Look to your right and way off down that way, you'll see the herds." When Fargo looked and nodded, Homer went on. "The trail bosses are waiting for a few more herds to arrive, then they'll move the whole lot of 'em on north and take the Baxter Springs Trail to St. Joe. Where are you and the women heading?"

"Don't rightly know about them, but sunup tomorrow I'll head north."

Homer's head jerked around to face Fargo. Concern was in his tone when Homer asked, "By yourself? Mister, you ought to think twice before doing that. Don't you know what's just over the horizon?"

"Comanche?"

"You damn right. Thousands of 'em. Mister, they're wild as hell, mean sonsabitches. They'd have your scalp before you could say scat." Homer shook his mane balefully.

The women walked through the opening and joined them. Fargo shook Homer's hand, then led the women back into the town proper. On the way he asked Andrée where they wanted to go.

She answered, "To the hotel we saw."

He asked, "What if he isn't there?"

"We'll wait for him," Camille interjected quickly.

Coming to the corner, Fargo told them, "I'll give you ladies one night to meet the gentleman and complete your secret business with him, then I'm moving on. If you haven't by morning, then you're on your own."

Monique muttered under her breath, "He'll be here. He has to come."

They entered the hotel lobby and stepped to the registration counter. Andrée asked the clerk if a man wearing a red vest and red bowler was a guest.

Opening the registration book, the clerk asked, "What's the gentleman's name, madam?"

Andrée told him she didn't know, but a man dressed like that was to meet them in Cowtown today.

The clerk sighed and said, "I haven't seen a red bowler in this town all year. Maybe the man you're to meet will be on the next stage. Where's he coming from?" When

Andrée shook her head, the clerk told her, "The next stage due is coming from St. Joseph. If the redskins haven't attacked it, it should arrive within the next hour or so. Do you want rooms?"

Fargo signed the register. "I do," he said. "Give me one upstairs that gives a view of the street."

The clerk handed him a key. "That would be Room Ten. How long are you staying? It's a dollar per night."

Fargo laid a dollar on the counter and looked questioningly at Andrée.

She shook her head and said, "No. Walk outside with us."

They went out on the porch. Andrée looked at the Primrose Path and said, "I know that is a brothel. We want you to acquire an upstairs front room for us so we can see who gets off the stagecoach when it comes. Will you do that, Mr. Fargo? After we meet the man, I will pay you handsomely for all you have done for us."

Fargo wondered how much "handsomely" amounted to. Coming from Andrée it could easily be five whole dollars. But he nodded and said, "Come on, ladies, let's to to the whorehouse."

"Brothel," Camille corrected.

"Brothel," Fargo echoed.

He took them around and entered the Primrose Path through the rear entrance. They stepped into a spacious kitchen manned by a heavyset black woman. She became rigid at sight of the habits. Wiping her hands on her apron, she asked, "You folks lost?"

Fargo chuckled. "No. We're here to see the owner. Would you tell her?"

The cook hurried away. A few minutes later she returned with a redheaded woman several years older than Fargo, but still in damn good shape for her line of business. She had an enormous bosom, pleasantly rounded belly, and wide hips. Fargo thought she wore a tad too much rouge. After introducing himself, he told her the women's names and said they were nuns. "They're on a secret mission for a bishop," he lied. He told her about the red-vested man and concluded, "So I need to rent an upstairs front room for them to stay in for a few hours."

The buxom woman looked up and down each of the women before saying, "My name's Sadie Nelson." After a brief hesitation she said, "Yeah, I guess I could let them use Myrtle's room for a while. But I don't want any of my customers laying eyes on them. You all wait here while I go make sure no men are in the parlor."

Sadie walked away shaking her head and mumbling to herself. Within seconds she opened the door and motioned Fargo and the women to come on. Passing through the sweet-smelling parlor—Fargo believed the heavy aroma came from lilacs, not roses—all of the fancy ladies' eyes roamed over Fargo's muscled body. Two smiled provocatively at him, and one even cupped one of her breasts for him.

Sadie took them inside Myrtle's room. Andrée stepped to the window and parted the curtain. She nodded approval. Sadie said evenly, "Myrtle's very popular. She turns at least twenty dollars every night."

Fargo handed her twenty-five and said, "They'll take it." He nudged Camille and told her, "None of you is to go outside this room until Sadie says it's okay. I'll be in the Four Jacks next door. Come get me if you need me; otherwise I'll see you at breakfast in the morning."

Monique purred, "I like this place." She fell backward onto the huge bed.

As Fargo and Sadie were leaving, he heard fingers snapping. He went inside the noisy saloon, ordered a bottle of bourbon, and sat at a table next to a front window to drink. The sun was almost down, casting long shadows throughout Cowtown, when the stagecoach rumbled to a halt in front of the line office. Fargo watched two women alight first. Two stocky men followed them out the coach door. They flexed their shoulders as they moved out into the middle of the street and looked about. Both wore gun belts.

One of the men turned toward the stage and said something. Fargo watched a red bowler appear when the reluctant passenger bent to step through the coach door. When he stood, Fargo saw he wore a bright-red vest. "Charles Gudoy has arrived," Fargo muttered, "with two hefty bodyguards."

The trio huddled next to the stage and conversed briefly before one of the bodyguards broke away and headed for the hotel. Fargo watched Gudoy and the other man come inside the saloon and stand at the bar. He got up and moved to stand next to Gudoy. The bodyguard looked at Fargo suspiciously and in a thick Irish brogue said, "Sir, we'd prefer you go somewhere else to drink."

Fargo nodded, stepped back, moved over behind the Irishman, and tapped him on the shoulder. When the fellow jerked around, Fargo's big right fist powered into his jaw. The man hit against the bar and slumped unconscious to the floor. Fargo smiled at the paunchy man and said, "I believe you're in town to meet three nuns from Mexico." He stuck his hand out to Gudoy and added, "My name's Skye Fargo. I brought them here."

Gudoy pumped Fargo's hand excitedly. Completely ignoring his groaning bodyguard, Gudoy said, "Damn, am I ever so glad to meet you and hear what you just said. By all means, Mr. Fargo, take me to them. Jean-Pierre?"

"Dead," Fargo replied. "They're next door, waiting for you. You want to wait for your other man?"

"No. Take me to them now, please."

Going through the swinging doors, Fargo banged them into the other fellow, who was about to enter. The man went for his six-shooter. Before he could draw it, Fargo slammed a fist into his stomach. Wind gushed from the man's mouth as he doubled over.

Unconcerned, Gudoy said, "Jeremy, go inside and take care of Flanagan." Gudoy looked up at Fargo and nodded that he was ready to go.

Fargo took him to the room and waited outside while he and the women conducted their secret business. While he didn't understand one word of what they said—all spoke in French—he did understand from the bitter emotion they put in them that things weren't going as planned. After ten minutes of heated conversation, the door flew open and Gudoy strode out, his face redder than his vest and bowler. The grim-jawed, portly little man did not even acknowledge Fargo as he passed and hurried down the stairs.

The Trailsman stepped inside the room. Andrée stood by the window, her arms folded at her bosom. She looked mad as hell. Monique leaned against a wall. She too looked sullen, as though the worst that could happen had. Camille looked at him and shrugged.

He said, "I take it you ladies have a problem. Can I help?"

Camille answered, "Go beat some sense into his head."

"Why? What did he do?" Fargo asked. He looked at Andrée for the answer.

"He's stupid," she hissed.

Fargo realized they were too angry and distraught for him to get anything meaningful out of them. They needed a little time to cool down. He said, "I'll go hear what he has to say. Stay put till I come back." He left them staring at him.

The threesome had moved to a table when Fargo came through the double doors. They were leaning in toward one another. Gudoy was doing all the talking. Fargo went to the table and sank down in a chair. The bodyguards leaned back and squinted at him, not altogether sure of his fists' intentions. He said, "Bank your fires, boys, I'm here to talk."

Gudoy snorted, "About what? Those women are crazy. Crazy, I tell you. To think I came all this way to hear female bullshit. Jeansonne and I had a deal. The bitches want to change it. Goddamn, how I hate dealing with women. They'll screw up a perfectly good deal every time." He turned and stared out the window.

Fargo asked Jeremy, "What's this all about? What's the problem? Maybe I can fix it."

Jeremy shrugged and said, "Ask Charles. I wouldn't know."

Gudoy turned to Fargo. Rage filled his dark eyes as he said, "Jeansonne and I had agreed on one hundred thousand. That ice-cold bitch wants fifty grand more. I'm not paying it. A deal's a deal. Not one penny more will I pay." There was finality in his tone.

Pushing back from the table, Fargo suggested, "I'll go talk to them. Wait here while I'm gone." He stood and left.

The women were still bristling when he walked into the room.

"Well?" Andrée snapped.

"Gudoy says you ladies reneged on the deal he had with Jeansonne. That true?"

"He lies," Monique replied sourly. "He's the one who reneged."

Camille explained, "The deal was for a hundred thousand. That fat little bastard changed it to seventy-five."

Andrée butted in, snarling, "With Jean-Pierre dead, Gudoy thought he could walk in here and get us to come down on the price. He thinks women are stupid. He's wrong."

Fargo scratched his chin, tugged on an earlobe, finally said, "If I can get him to agree on the hundred, will you ladies?"

All three nodded.

Fargo returned to the bargaining table. He said, "Gents, here's how it stands. They'll give you what you want for one hundred thousand."

Gudoy grunted, "Hunh. Well, now I'll have to think it over."

"Do that," Fargo commented. "In the meantime I'll be in my room at the hotel. If you need me, send one of the boys to get me."

Fargo had done all he could. He left them sitting there and went to his room. He undressed, stretched out on the bed, and drifted to sleep listening to the sounds of the town.

A woman's piercing scream jarred his eyes open. He glanced at the window. It was dark outside. She screamed again. Two other women screamed with her. He heard one call his name. Fargo grabbed his Colt from under the pillow and left the bed to look down on the street. "Achmid," he muttered.

The women and Achmid were grappling on the balcony of the Primrose Path. Sadie and two of her whores were half-naked, dashing about on the front porch. A man dressed only in his underdrawers vaulted the picket fence and ran toward the Four Jacks. As Fargo released the curtains, he saw Andrée climb over the balcony rail

and hang from the edge to drop to the ground. Her left hand gripped a satchel.

Fargo quickly pulled on his clothes to go help the women. As he rushed from the room, he strapped on his gun belt.

Gunfire erupted out on the street.

A man screamed, then another.

Fargo dashed out of the hotel, into the street, his Colt out and ready for action.

He looked toward the whorehouse. Nobody was on the balcony. Sadie and the two whores had left the porch. Two men lay sprawled in the street in front of Sadie's place.

Fargo ran inside the whorehouse. Sadie and her girls were cowering in dark shadows at the rear of the staircase. He bolted up the stairs, sprinted to Myrtle's door, and flung it open. The room was deserted. As he turned to leave, something out of place caught his eye. The curtain sashes lay twisted on the bed. The sashes were knotted on the ends. He knew instantly what had happened, and knew he had to hurry. He tore down the stairs, leapt over the fence, and ran for Randolph's Livery.

Homer lay on the ground at the big opening. Fargo pulled him into a sitting position and asked, "Did you see which way they went, Homer?"

Homer pointed a shaking finger north. Groggily, he mumbled, "Comanche Crossing."

12

Fargo hurried to make the Ovaro ready to ride. As he drew the cinch taut, Homer staggered to him and leaned against a stall gate. Rubbing his head, he said, "I tried to tell them women not to go that way, but they wouldn't listen. I've never seen females saddle horses that fast. Mister, they acted like the devil hisself was after 'em."

"He was," Fargo suggested. "Who hit you?"

"A woman in her nightgown. She ran up right after a fat guy hit me. Before I could get up and knock shit out of him, he stole my Spencer and Frank Taylor's horse I'd just saddled up. Frank's going to be mad as hell when he comes to get that horse that isn't here. That female in the nightgown sure could hit hard. My ears are still ringing."

Fargo mounted up. "Come outside, Homer, and show me which way to go."

Homer pointed and said, "Can't miss the crossing, mister. Ride hard and you'll come to the river about daybreak. The crossing is the only place on that part of the river you can get across safely. Try anything else and you'll find yourself in quicksand real fast."

Fargo spurred the Ovaro and headed in the direction Homer pointed. Reckoning that the five riders ahead of him would take the paths of least resistance, he stayed on level ground as much as he could until dawn's first light appeared. He had been correct in figuring their route. Five sets of shod hooves showed him the way. All were spaced for him to know they had the horses in dead runs. At the rate they were moving without letup, their mounts

would drop dead by sunup. He slowed the stallion to cool it down.

At sunrise he topped a rise and ran straight into the savages gathered at Comanche Crossing. As he reined back hard, the stallion squatted with his hind hooves digging into the soft soil. Four Comanche grabbed Fargo and pulled him to the ground before the pinto stopped skidding. After taking his Colt and Arkansas toothpick, they muscled him to their chief, the same man who carried the pogamoggan and who had taken the McCurdy women.

He looked at Fargo from where he sat astride his pony and in good, clear English said, "Ah, so we meet again, white man. Why are you here? Have you lost your way?" He motioned toward the muddy water. The money satchel floated among bills that hadn't sunk or drifted downstream.

Fargo realized their best chance of getting out of this situation would be for him to try and confuse the Comanche. He thought fast, then jerked free of the hands gripping his arms and snarled, "Where are the evil ones? What have you done with them?"

The Comanche motioned with a hand as he grunted in his own language. The pack of Indians crowded on the crossing parted. Others shoved the seven whites through the gap. Opal looked haggard, Pearl very tired. The three Frenchwomen were grim-jawed, sullen. Achmid acted extremely nervous and Gudoy was about to shake to pieces.

"That's them," Fargo said. "They're wanted for committing terrible crimes. I'll take them back for hanging. With your permission, of course."

The Indian laughed. "With my permission," he mused. "White man, Chief Long Bone likes you. With my permission," he repeated. "I like that. What did these people do that makes you come to our lands to get them?"

Fargo replied, "Oh, they're evil, all right. The worst kind." He nodded toward Opal and Pearl. "Those two are wanted for stealing and eating little babies. I had them till you arrived."

Opal gasped, "Liar! Filthy, rotten liar."

Pearl suddenly realized what Fargo was doing. She

looked at her mother and said, "Aw, hell, Mama, there ain't no sense in denying it. Half of Texas knows we been eating kids."

Before Opal could respond, Fargo pointed at the three Frenchwomen and said, "They're witches. You've seen how they act." He moved the damning finger on Andrée and said, "She's the witch from France. She boils snakes and frogs, uses the potion to make humans' skin fall off."

He shook the finger at Monique. "That stage way station you attacked and tried to burn down? With one hot breath she blew the roof off that big barn."

He squinted at Camille. "This witch is worst of all. Remember those longhorns you people stampeded? She made herself sprout wings, then flew over those steers till they got so confused they stopped running. Then she cut the hearts out of four and ate them for breakfast."

Chief Long Bone and his men stared at Camille.

Fargo wondered what was racing around in their minds. He faced Achmid and said, "This man thinks he's a woman. He's useless. You don't want him. He lures women's husbands away. There's six wives back in Cowtown waiting to hang him for the things he did to their men."

Moving quickly to Gudoy, Fargo sneered, "This man is a liar and a thief." He nodded toward the Frenchwomen and went on. "They have something he wants. He wants it so bad that he will kill to get it. He left two men lying dead in the street back in Cowtown."

Chief Long Bone looked at the Frenchwomen, but spoke to Fargo, "What do they have to make a man kill for it? I don't see anything."

Remembering the ring, Fargo suggested they might have it hidden in their clothing. "Or on their bodies," he added as an afterthought.

Chief Long Bone grunted an order and dismounted. He stepped in front of Monique and extended his right hand out to his side. A warrior slapped the handle of a skinning knife in Long Bone's upturned palm. He told Monique to remove her wimple. She did and shook her head to cause her hair to spread over her shoulders. The sparkling on both sides of her head came from silver

diamond-encrusted earrings. They were quite large. Long Bone placed the blade inside the top opening of her habit and sliced downward through the hem. The habit fell open.

A leather thong hung around her neck. On the bottom of it dangled the biggest sterling ring Fargo had ever seen. It glittered with diamonds surrounding a bloodred ruby. And she had swiped a pair of Myrtle's underwear.

Camille voluntarily took off her wimple. She pulled her hair back to show she wore no earrings. Long Bone cut her habit open and parted it. A magnificent silver necklace adorned her neck and upper chest. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of tiny diamonds embedded in the mantle sparkled in the sunlight. There was more to be seen. Encircling her slim waist was a silver waistband also embellished with tiny diamonds. A V-shaped piece hung from the front of it and covered the pubic area. It too was covered with diamonds.

Andrée stood rigid while Long Bone removed her wimple and looked at her ears. They were barren of silver and diamonds. Fargo could hardly wait for him to slice her habit apart. When he did and it fell open, they saw she wasn't at all pregnant, as Fargo had already suspected, but the bulge was caused by a cloth wrapping. Long Bone gently cut it open. A silver, bejeweled crown fell to the ground.

Long Bone grunted another command. Warriors stepped forward and removed all the jewelry from the women. They proceeded to use their knives to pick the silver clean of diamonds. The Indians weren't interested in the gemstones. All they wanted was the silver. The priceless stones showered onto the dry, narrow passage across the shallow river as fast as the Indians plucked them from their mountings.

Along with Achmid and Gudoy, the Frenchwomen emitted a horrified gasp. Collecting his wits, Gudoy blurted, "Stop them! They're destroying the jewels of Alcazara." He fell to his knees and started picking larger diamonds from the dirt.

Long Bone kicked Gudoy's hand holding the precious stones. A spray of glitter flew into the muddy water.

Long Bone snatched Gudoy to his feet and shoved him into a warrior's waiting arms. Gudoy promptly fainted.

When the war chief turned his attention to Achmid, Fargo whispered to the Frenchwomen to start growling and making faces. "Claw at the savages with your fingers," he suggested.

He was pleasantly surprised by their performance. Not only did they do what he said, they also crouched animal-like and kicked dirt at the Comanche. The surprised Indians drew back, confusion rippling across their faces.

Pearl screamed, "Give me a baby to eat. I'm starving."

Astonished that her daughter would say such a thing, Opal bent and vomited at the water's edge.

Long Bone grabbed Fargo's arm and spun him around. Another guttural order came from the tall Indian's throat. Warriors seized Fargo and slammed him facedown on the ground. A decision had been made. Fargo closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and waited for the blow from the pogamoggan.

Long Bone was issuing orders left and right. Feet scurried. Women shrieked. Ponies knickered. The savages mounted up. Fargo opened his eyes and cut them to one side. Long Bone's moccasins filled his vision. Looking over the footwear, Fargo watched Pearl sail through the air and splash into the muddy river. Opal's scarecrow body went next. The Indians were hurling their captives into the water on both sides of Comanche Crossing. One of the moccasins raised. Fargo took a breath and put his nose in the dirt. The foot stomped the back of his head, held, and shoved down.

The moccasin moved off his head. Fargo lay still and listened to hooves pound inches from his body. The Comanche left. He waited until after he heard them go up and over the high, eroded bank on the far side of the wide river, then pressed up and looked around.

Pearl and her mother were kneeling in the water. They were covered with red mud, gasping for fresh air. Pearl yelled, "Help us. We're sinking in the mud."

The Frenchwomen were in the same bad fix, their split habits soaked with mud, their bodies covered with more of it. Achmid stood knee-deep in the quicksand, holding

up the hem of his once-pure white gown, now soiled red forever. He stared disbelieving at the desert garment. Gudoy sat crying, his pudgy body racked with a severe case of the shakes. As Fargo looked at him, Gudoy was sucked down several inches.

Fargo came to his feet and whistled for the Ovaro. The stallion trotted up to him. To Fargo's amazement, the Sharps was in its saddle case. He looked about for his Colt and stiletto. Both lay on dry land near the water's edge at the far end of the crossing. He got them, then removed his throwing rope from his saddle and used it to haul the others out of the muddy water and quicksand onto solid land.

Gudoy and Achmid searched frantically in the dirt to find diamonds. Hooves had pounded them from sight.

Fargo pulled both men erect and said, "You fools. Haven't those jewels caused enough grief? Be glad you're alive. Go find your horses and mount up. The Comanche might change their minds and come back."

His words were sobering. Everybody looked in the direction the Indians had departed, then moved swiftly to get their horses.

Fargo led them south at a gallop. An hour passed before anyone spoke.

Andrée brought her chestnut alongside his pinto. She asked, "What do we do now, Mr. Fargo?"

He reined to a halt and had the others draw near. He spoke to Pearl first. "Are you and your mother all right? You know what I mean."

She nodded her mud-caked head and answered, "Yeah, they didn't bother us none. Mama, she hollered ever' time one of 'em touched her. They hit her, but that was it. My time of the month started the minute they grabbed me back at the ranch. They didn't want no part of me."

Fargo looked at the others. "All right, *mademoiselles*, now you and these two idiots are going to tell me what this was all about. I know bullshit when I hear it, so don't try to throw any my way."

Andrée said, "We, along with Jean-Pierre, are jewel thieves, cat burglars." She went on to explain the Alcazarian jewels originally belonged to a sheik who

took them to Spain when the Moors invaded the country. The jewels, she said, were lost during battle, but found by a Spanish shepherd about a century later, well after the Moors had left. "To shorten a long story," she suggested, "the jewels ended up in Mexico City." She paused and looked at Achmid.

Achmid said, "Muhammad Hojab, Defender of the Faith, sent four of us to Mexico City as his emissaries to arrange for the purchase of the jewels and to return them to Morocco." He went on to explain that, as a safeguard in the event a purchase couldn't be made, Hojab contacted Jeansonne, a notorious international jewel thief, and arranged for him to go to Mexico City, where he, Achmid, would get even with them should his offer fail to buy back the Alcazarian jewels. "The Mexicans refused to bargain," Achmid said in conclusion.

Camille picked up on the story. "Jean-Pierre took us with him to Mexico. Each of us has a different specialty when it comes to taking items kept in supposedly safe places. The building where they were kept is a sieve, a joke."

Monique said, "Achmid and his men waited outside while we broke in and got the jewels."

Fargo was way ahead of her. He nodded, grinned, and said, "Only you left them standing there to watch the sun come up. The four of you made off with the jewels, got a hold of the habits somehow so you could move about without drawing suspicion, then rode for Texas, where Jeansonne had arranged for Gudoy here to meet you in Cowtown." The women's heads nodded. Fargo added, "We know the rest."

Gudoy whined, "This has cost me a small fortune."

Fargo replied, "Like all the others, Charles, you're too greedy for your own good." He looked at Andrée. "To answer your original question, I don't know what you people are going to do when I get you back to Cowtown. Frankly, I don't give a shit. I know what I'm going to do." He reined the pinto south and rode away.

They came into Cowtown at noon. Homer watched the bedraggled procession approach. Fargo halted in front of him and bought two of his sorriest horses for Pearl and

Opal to ride bareback. Then he led them to Main Street and halted outside the Four Jacks and said, "All right, folks, all of you except Pearl and her mother are on your own. My promise is finished. Good luck." He told Pearl and Opal to come on.

He took them to the herds north of the town. He halted near drovers who squatted, drinking coffee, around a small fire. Pecos glanced over his shoulder at him and said, "You back? I thought John—"

Fargo interrupted him, saying, "Where will I find Tilden?"

Pecos stood. "In town. He's having the doc look at Les' gunshot wound."

Fargo nodded and said, "These two hunks of dried mud with me are Pearl and Opal McCurdy. I'd be obliged if you'd take them off my hands and see to it they're returned to Lucas when you see him in St. Joe."

Pecos looked at the two females. "No need, mister. Lucas and his drovers are right over there." He pointed to them standing behind a chuck wagon parked not too far away.

The women dismounted and ran to the chuck wagon.

Fargo rode over to Lucas, who was hugging both females tightly and said, "Name's Fargo, Mr. McCurdy. I'm the one who caused all this and got your placed burned to the ground. I'm sorry about that. But I intend to do something to help make it right."

Lucas watched him dig down in a pocket. Fargo held his left fist out to him. Lucas put an open hand under it. Fargo opened his hand. Diamonds fell in Lucas' palm.

Fargo said, "In St. Joe they ought to bring enough cash for you to build a new home and barn. That's the best I can do to make things right with you."

Lucas said, "To hell with the house and barn. I would have gone out of my mind when I got home and found my loved ones had been captured by Comanche. You're a brave man, Fargo, for riding into Comanche country to get them back. I'm the one who owes, not you."

Fargo sat easy in the saddle a moment longer, touched the brim of his hat, and headed back to town.

The doctor's office was easy enough to find. He went

in and saw Les lying on a table, the doctor wrapping a bandage around the thigh, John looking on. Les spied him standing in the doorway and said cheerily, "Howdy, Mr. Fargo."

John spun to face him. "What do you want?" he growled.

Fargo told him about retrieving the McCurdy women and delivering them to Lucas. "Now, I want to make things right with you and this boy," he said. He handed a bright-red ruby to John and suggested it would bring enough money to pay for the steers the Comanche took, with enough left over to buy a new chuck wagon for Mac. Then he reached behind him and withdrew the Smith & Wesson he'd stopped and bought on his way to the doctor's office. He held it out to Les and said, "Thanks for shooting that redskin. You probably saved my life. Learn how to handle and shoot this gun. It might save your own life one day."

John winked at Fargo, then shook his hand.

Fargo went to the Four Jacks to have a drink or two before heading out. Achmid and Gudoy were seated at a table, Gudoy doing all the drinking and talking. Both had bathed and bought new clothes. Achmid seemed uncomfortable dressed in western garb. Fargo joined them. He asked, "What are you two scoundrels scheming about?"

Gudoy answered, "There's a bank down the street."

Fargo got up and went outside. As he put a foot in his stirrup, a female voice cried, "Yoohoo! Oh, Mr. Fargo?"

He looked at Sadie Nelson's Primrose Path. Andrée stood at the balcony railing. She looked different—gorgeous, in fact—dressed in pretty yellow. She smiled down at him and crooked a finger for him to come to her.

Fargo vaulted the white picket fence, scaled a trellis, and climbed over the balcony railing. Taking his hand, Andrée purred, "We are working for Sadie now to earn enough money for passage back to France. Come inside, Mr. Fargo. I want to repay you for all you did as best I can—the only way I can, for the time being."

Her dress fell to her ankles the instant the balcony

door closed behind Fargo. She turned, opened his fly, squatted, and pulled out his hardening member.

After rubbing the swelling crown on her face, she kissed it and murmured, "My, my, look what I found. A jewel of another kind for me to put in my silver mine. Lucky me."

As she took his member into her hot mouth, Fargo removed the last of the diamonds from his pocket and placed them on a small table within easy reach. The jewels would bring enough cash to pay for their passage back to France.

But first he had to deal with Andrée. He reckoned she owed him much. Fargo intended to dig in her hot little mine many times.

LOOKING FORWARD!

The following is the opening section from the next novel in the exciting *Trailsman* series from Signet:

THE TRAILSMAN #105
BLACK HILLS BLOOD

Summer, 1860, near the Black Hills, where Pawnee and strange beasts fought, and death lurked in a wicker basket . . .

A scorching July sun, diffused in a cloudless white sky, beat down unmercifully on the big man astride the magnificent black-and-white pinto stallion heading north at a slow walk. Their heads drooped and their eyes were half closed, not from fatigue or the blistering heat, but from the boredom of crossing over nothingness since daybreak.

No breeze blew to set the tall, parched prairie grass waving. The terrain surrounding the man and the Ovaro shimmered in heat waves. Two barren buttes beyond a lengthy and wide gulch stood sentinel-like far off to the west; nothing but wasteland lay to the east. A rocky incline loomed ahead, flat desolation behind.

Dozens of buzzards circled overhead. Without bothering to look, Skye Fargo knew they were up there watching patiently for him or the pinto to drop and die.

Well, he mused wryly to himself, you'll starve to death waiting for us.

They were still in hostile Nebraska Territory. Only after he had crossed into the untamed Dakota Territory would the big man stop for the night. At dawn he would veer east to Pierre's trading post on the west bank of the Missouri.

As the Ovaro maneuvered around and between rocks on the gentle slope, the Trailsman's thoughts were on the French women he'd rescued earlier from savage Comanches down in Texas. He grinned inwardly at the thought of the three make-believe nuns working flat on their shapely backs in Sadie Nelson's whorehouse, the Primrose Path. He could imagine the long line of townsmen and drovers who gladly waited their turn to pay twice the normal amount to crawl between a gorgeous nun's slender legs. It went without saying that Sadie would tout them as former nuns, concubines of the cardinals, bishops, or even the pope in the Vatican.

He was so engrossed with these thoughts that he failed to notice the stallion lift his head and perk his ears. Passing between two outcrops of large rocks, the Ovaro nickered softly.

The Trailsman's lake-blue eyes opened instantly and focused on his mount's ears, too late to draw his Colt or ward off the four half-naked, screaming savages hurtling toward him through the hot, still air. They knocked him to the ground as others swarmed over the rocks from both ends of the narrow passage. Shoved facedown, disarmed of his Colt and Arkansas toothpick, he was then bound at the wrists with his own throwing rope.

The absence of war paint on their faces told the big man this was a hunting party. While he didn't know their language well enough to hold a conversation, he understood enough to know they were Pawnee.

Two young boys were hoisted into his saddle. A warrior tied the other end of the rope to the saddlehorn and slapped the pinto's rump.

The big man came to his feet and trotted behind his

horse. After going a short distance, a pony-mounted warrior rode up and kicked the Ovaro's flank to make him go faster and pull the captive down. The youngsters giggled as they watched the white man drag over stones, through dry grass, and plow the sun-baked topsoil.

To his relief they arrived at the Indian's encampment half an hour later. Children of all ages ran to greet the party. Seeing the captive, older youngsters darted in to kick him. When they fell back laughing, their younger brothers and sisters ran up and spat on him.

The party halted in a circular area surrounded by tepees.

The Trailsman staggered to his feet and scanned the red faces staring at him. One, young and pretty, seemed to show pity for him. As he focused on her, she lowered her gaze and stepped back.

Within seconds the crowd in front of him parted to clear a path for two older men who strode from a tepee. From their garb he knew they were the chief and medicine man. The medicine man approached and beat Fargo's chest and shoulders with a gourd rattle to chase away the white man's bad spirits. Only then did the chief step in front of the captive. After studying the big man for what seemed an unusually long time, the chief counseled with his medicine man, then spoke to one of the warriors in the hunting party.

The warrior dismounted and grunted to several of his companions. One released the rope from the saddlehorn while the others pointed lances at their captive. They steered him to a tepee on the outer perimeter of the encampment and shoved him inside. He watched them remove robes from the rear half of the interior to leave the ground barren. Moving swiftly, they shoved him to the ground and stripped him naked. His clothes and weapons were piled next to the tepee entrance. Stakes were driven in the bare earth. They used rawhide thongs to bind his hands and feet to the stakes. After testing his bindings for security, they left.

He stared up through the tepee's upper vent and watched the white sky slowly give way to evening colors.

He tried repeatedly to wrench free of the stakes, but neither they nor the rawhide would give.

At sunset he heard someone approaching. He hoped the person brought him water and food. The tepee flap opened and a gangly white man entered and sat on robes by the entrance.

The fellow wore a tattered buckskin shirt and baggy trousers held up by wide green suspenders. A grimy, wide-brimmed hat with a pheasant feather stuck in the band rested on his head. Knee-high buckskin leggings sagged on his skinny legs. He had a bushy black beard and mustache, wild, unruly hair, and unusually large eyebrows. Set close to a narrow nose, his dark, sunken eyes studied the naked man. The fellow stank to high heaven.

He spoke in a high-pitched, nasal voice that bordered on a whine. "You're in a helluva fix, mister. Chief Black Buffalo and his medicine man, Looks Bad In The Face, are arguing right now over what to do with you. Looks Bad wants to skin you alive. Black Buffalo wants to bury you standing up in a hole with only your noggin showing so the sun can cook your brain. You'll know in the morning which one of 'em got his way."

"Yeah, well I don't intend staying here to find out," the Trailsman replied dryly. "How about getting me a drink of water?"

"Cain't do that, mister. The chief told me not to. Not that it matters, but what's your name?"

"Skye Fargo."

The man's eyes flared. He moved to squat next to Fargo. "Skye Fargo? Are you the one they call the Trailsman?"

"One and the same."

Shoving his hat back on his head, the man muttered, "Well, I'll be damned." In a stronger voice he said, "You're the luckiest man alive, mister. I've been hoping to run into you. Me and you got business to discuss, serious business."

"Well, this chat is over till water flows down my throat."

He watched the man finger his mustache nervously,

then go outside. A few minutes later he returned with a gourd dipper full of water. Fargo lifted his head and opened his mouth. After gulping the dipper dry, he asked, "So who are you? And while you're at it, tell me why these Pawnee haven't taken your scalp."

The man rocked back on his haunches. When he smiled, Fargo saw rotted, snaggled teeth. He responded to Fargo's last inquiry first. "When he was alive, my pappy hunted this area. Back then the Indians and white men were friendly. He took a Pawnee maiden for his woman. Ain't rightly sure, but I was borned in '25, '26 or thereabouts. Name's Scut. Scut Hohendorf."

"Okay, Scut, what business do you have that concerns me?"

Scut sat and crossed his legs at the ankles before he answered. "Got a proposition to put to you. If you go for it, I might be able to talk your way out of here. Won't be easy, but I'll damn sure try. Cain't guarantee nothing, though. That medicine man wants your hide real bad."

"You're rambling, Scut. Get on with the proposition."

Scut's eyebrows arched. "Well, now, ain't you the one? Mister, you ain't in no position to go ordering me or anybody else around. I'll get around to it in my own good time."

Fargo turned his head to face the tepee covering. He heard Scut move back and sit on the robes. After a long silence, Scut said, "You don't like me, do you, big man?"

Fargo kept his mouth closed.

Scut went on, saying, "Makes no difference to me. Hell, you ain't no prize, either. We don't have to take to one another to do what I have in mind. You want to hear it? If you do, then look at me. I don't like talking to a man's back."

Fargo toyed with the thought of continuing to ignore the foul-smelling man. He decided that if he did, Scut would sit there and drive him crazy talking in circles. He looked at Scut and said, "I'd make a pact with the devil if he'd let just one of my hands loose. So what is it you're itching to say?"

Scut came back and squatted next to him. "Just this,

mister. Before he died, my pappy showed me a gold nugget he found." Scut paused to dig a small nugget from his pocket. Holding it for Fargo to see, he continued. "He told me there was plenty more where this one came from."

Fargo wondered aloud, "Why did he take only the one? Why not a bag full of them while he was at it?"

Scut chuckled, "Sioux warriors spied him. He was lucky to get away with even this one."

"Sioux? Where was he in Sioux country?"

"Said he was smack-dab in the middle of the Black Hills."

Now it made sense to Fargo. No white man in his right mind would dare venture into the Siouan's most holy grounds, He Sapa. The sacred Black Hills were the Sioux peoples' Garden of Eden, forbidden territory. The penalty for a white man caught there was a swift death.

Fargo knew the proposition before he asked for it. "All right, how do I fit into your scheme of things?"

"I hear tell one man, the Trailsman, gets along with the Sioux. That right?"

"I speak their language."

"Ever been in the hills?"

"A few times. With their permission, of course."

Nodding, Scut said, "Pappy told me where he found the nugget. Only thing is, I don't know my way around in them hills."

"You want me to take you there? That it, Scut?"

"You said it, mister. All you have to do is get me there and back, and keep an eye out for the Sioux while I do all the work. We'll split whatever I find. That's my proposition. How's it sound to you? Want in?"

Fargo wanted no part in Scut's insane scheme. But neither did he want to remain staked to the ground. He said, "You have a deal, Scut. Now cut me loose and let's get away from here before I change my mind."

Scut fell back, laughing hard. Calming, he said, "Good try, mister, but it don't work that way. Bad Face must have at least ten warriors out there, watching this tepee.

Like I done said, come morning I'll see if I can talk your way out of this fix."

"What if you fail?"

Scut didn't answer until after he lay down to sleep. "I won't," he muttered. "I'll make it my business not to. You're my ace in the hole. I need you as bad as you need me."

That part was true. Fargo mused aloud, "Once we're clear of this place, what's to keep me from leaving you or blowing your head off?"

Scut laughed before he answered, "Naw, mister, you won't do either of those things. Why would you, what with all that gold waiting there for us? Hell, stick with me and you'll be a rich man. Don't know about you, but I'm taking my share to Chicago. Gonna buy me some fine clothes and get me a couple of young redheaded fillies." Fargo watched Scut roll onto his side with his back showing and heard him mumble, "See you in the morning, *pardner*."

Within minutes Scut went to sleep. Scut's snorings roaring in his ears, Fargo stared out the upper ventilation opening and watched low-hanging storm clouds boil in and blot out the stars. Thunder rumbled across the flat terrain and shook the tepee. Lightning flashed in the rolling clouds. None of it affected Scut in the least. Not once did Fargo see the snoring man toss or turn.

A high wind blasted in. Shortly thereafter, huge, ice-cold raindrops fell through the opening and spattered Fargo's body. He shivered as the angry clouds dumped a torrential downpour onto the encampment.

Cold water streamed in from under the bottom of the tepee covering. Within minutes the ground beneath his backside turned into mud. He pulled and tugged on all four stakes and, though he felt them give, they were in too deep for him to pull up.

Fargo relaxed and rested his muscles, waiting for the water to seep down around the stakes.

Thunder boomed. Lightning struck nearby. Then he watched a long knife blade puncture the covering at the rear of the tepee, then slice downward.

SIGNET (0451)

UNTAMED ACTION ON THE WESTERN FRONTIER

☐ **THE TERREL BRAND by E.Z. Woods.** Owen Terrel came back from the Civil War looking for peace. He and his brother carved out a cattle kingdon in West Texas, but then a beautiful woman in danger arrived, thrusting Owen into a war against an army of bloodthirsty outlaws. He would need every bullet he had to cut them down. . . . (158113—$3.50)

☐ **CONFESSIONS OF JOHNNY RINGO by Geoff Aggeler.** It was a showdown for a legend: Johnny Ringo. Men spoke his name in the same hushed breath as Jesse and Frank James, the Youngers, Billy the Kid. But those other legendary outlaws were gone. Only he was left, and on his trail was the most deadly lawman in the West. (159888—$4.50)

☐ **SALT LAKE CITY by A.R. Riefe.** Mormon settlers and U.S. soldiers are on the brink of catastrophic conflict—in a Western epic of challenge and triumph. (163265—$4.50)

☐ **A LAND REMEMBERED by Patrick D. Smith.** Tobias MacIvey started with a gun, a whip, a horse and a dream of taming a wilderness that gave no quarter to the weak. He was the first of an unforgettable family who rose to fortune from the blazing guns of the Civil War, to the glitter and greed of the Florida Gold Coast today. (158970—$4.95)

☐ **THE HOMESMAN by Glendon Swarthout.** A spinster, an army deserter, and four women who have gone out of their minds and out of control on a trek through the wildest west that turns into the ultimate test for them all. A Spur Award winner. "As good as novels get."—Cleveland Plain Dealer. (164296—$4.95)

Prices slightly higher in Canada

Buy them at your local bookstore or use this convenient coupon for ordering.

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY
P.O. Box 999, Bergenfield, New Jersey 07621

Please send me the books I have checked above. I am enclosing $_____ (please add $1.00 to this order to cover postage and handling). Send check or money order—no cash or C.O.D.'s. Prices and numbers are subject to change without notice.

Name_____

Address_____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.
This offer is subject to withdrawal without notice.

NEW TWISTS TO TERROR

Skye Fargo thought he had seen everything in the Wild West—but now he had an eyeful of strange sightings and a bellyful of savage surprises. First he ran into three beautiful nuns with mighty suspicious habits. Then he had to race for his life against Arab stallions ridden by real Arabs. Next he faced a Mexican cavalry on a campaign of carnage...Comanche warriors on a trail of lust and loot...and a mystery shrouded by murder. The Trailsman knew he was up against a new set of players in a no-limit game. But guns still spat out death the same old way....

THE

TRAILSMAN

THE SENSATIONAL, ACTION-FILLED SERIES WITH ALL THE VIOLENCE AND PASSION OF THE OLD WEST!

BE SURE TO READ THE OTHER BOOKS IN THIS EXCITING TRAILSMAN SERIES!

16705

0 71162 00350 5

ISBN 0-451-16705-8